

**Imaginative
Tales**

ACTION-PACKED SCIENCE FICTION

35¢

ANC

NOVEMBER, 1955

THE METAL EMPEROR

by Raymond A. Palmer



Introducing the



AUTHOR



Raymond A. Palmer



ME? What can I say about myself that wouldn't be true? Yes, I'm called the "son" of science fiction (I've got a plaque given me at the 2nd Chicon to prove it). There's some guff on this plaque about the services I rendered to science fiction during the past 29 years, but don't you believe it—the service has been the other way around. I'm nuts about science fiction, and can't help messing around with it. However, since I dislike talking about myself (modesty), I'll quote a few things others have said about me:

"The Shaver Mystery is a black blot on your escutcheon and you should be crucified by the dero."

"You talk too much about your-

self, and we're sick of it."

"You ruined *Amazing Stories*, and we'll never forgive you. Eleven years with you at the helm is enough to kill any magazine!"

"Nobody but an idiot would read **OTHER WORLDS**, which is a disgrace to the finest editor in the field." (Now how did *that* get in there?—oh yes, literary license on the part of the editor . . . you know, "we reserve the right to edit and revise to suit requirements").

"So you wrote your first story, "The Time Ray of Jandra" in 1926 and sold it to your "Dad," Hugo Gernsback? Better you should have stood in bed!" (Ed. Note: Gernsback has a plaque which says he is the father of

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NOVEMBER 1955

Imaginative Tales

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NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor

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Interior illustrations by Lloyd Rognan, W. E. Terry, and H. W. McCauley
Cartoons by Stan Fine, Bill Reid, and Luther Scheffy.

Published bi-monthly by Greenleaf Publishing Company, 1426 Fowler Avenue Evanston, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Evanston, Illinois. Additional entry at Sandusky, Ohio. Address all communications to IMAGINATIVE TALES, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. We do not accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or art work; submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed return envelopes. Accepted material is subject to whatever revision is necessary to meet requirements, and will be paid for at our current rates. The names of all characters used in stories are fictitious; any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental. Copyright 1955 Greenleaf Publishing Company. Subscription rate \$3.00 12 issues. Advertising rates sent upon request. Printed in U.S.A. by Stephens Printing Corp., Sandusky, Ohio. Volume 2, Number 2.

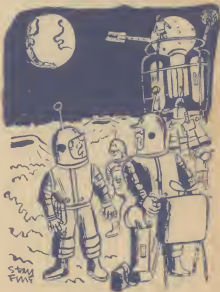
The Editorial.....

LIKE the cover on this issue? We'll bet you do—and we'd like to take a few words to introduce our new science fiction artist, Lloyd Rognan. Lloyd walked into our office several months ago with a pile of art samples. We looked them over and were impressed with his talent as a commercial artist. But since he had never tried his hand at science fiction—and read it only occasionally—we were a bit dubious about him doing work for *Madge* or *Tales*.

WE asked him if he'd care to work up a sketch and he said he would. He did. We promptly okayed it and the result is this month's cover. Needless to say we told Lloyd to go ahead and prepare other sketches. This he has done. The results you will see on forthcoming issues of *IMAGINATION* and *IMAGINATIVE TALES*. . . . By coincidence, Ray Palmer happened to be visiting us when Lloyd delivered his robot cover. Ray was impressed too. So much so that when we suggested he might like to do a story around the cover, Ray agreed to work one into his busy schedule as editor of *Other Worlds* and *Mystic Magazine*. An old master at action and adventure, Ray wrote *THE METAL EMPEROR* in a style reminiscent of his great work for *AMAZING* some years back. We think it proves the "son of science fiction" is still the favorite of the

family!

ONE other bit of news: you'll note another innovation in this issue, interior color. Not just one added color—but two! And as time goes on we'll give you even more. We feel the addition of color adds the final stamp of quality to the book. Just another indication that we're striving at all times to give you nothing but the best! And since, as the man said, "The best is yet to come!"—we'll see you next issue wh



"I want to go back!"

IT MAY BE NEWS TO YOU

but the
Egyptians
knew it
ages ago!

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From out of Earth's forgotten past sprang
a terrible menace to all mankind. Sweeping down
from the void came an invading horde, led by —

The Metal Emperor

by

Raymond A. Palmer

“OPEN hatches and drop
the uranium bombs into
the crater!”

The red warning signal flashed
on the control panel of the giant
spaceship, and the Rif captain
clutched his fingers about the mic-
rophone.

Having said the words, he turn-
ed to stare at the television screen

before him, and at the scene de-
picted upon its glowing surface.
Red flame and black smoke almost
obscured the view, but through
rifts in them could be seen the
glowing crater of the volcano two
miles below. And now, plainly vis-
ible in the screen, were the rapidly
diminishing diameters of the uran-
ium bombs as they fell toward the



center of the crater. There was no explosion as they dropped into the seething lava, for these were bombs only in the sense of their shape to guide the tons of pure uranium into the crater's mouth. Actually they were only "food" for the volcano's vitals, to create a chain reaction in its atomically digestive bowels that would eventually build up to an atomic explosion beyond all belief in its violence as a whole volcano exploded and destroyed the greatest city on all the earth.

The warning light on the control panel of the spaceship dimmed and went out. The deed was done.

A strange metallic-sounding voice, awesome in its deep rumbling, sounded now in the control room. The captain listened.

"Good! I have seen. Now drop your agents into the city environs itself, and set them about their duties. And when you have done that, signal the transports to descend and disembark their armies according to plan."

"Yes, Sire," said the Rif captain, respectfully. "It shall be done. Earth will know again, after these many thousands of years, the heavy tread of the Rif, and of your metal majesty, the Emperor of Mu!" The captain raised his hand in a symbolic salute, then spoke once more into the micro-

phone.

"Agents parachute! And when you have made your way into the city tunnels under cover of darkness, await the signal for the planned sabotage. And above all, destroy the governmental heads as planned. Mazhart must die— yet seem to live!"

The Rif captain leaned back, a grim smile on his lips. And far out in the void, in the largest spaceship of all, awaiting the moment to descend to the planet and take up his rule, sat the Metal Emperor, who was not smiling at all.

THE home planet of the Rif was a strange world, secret and impenetrable to all but the more foolhardy of traders, those who failed to note how few of them returned. Strangest of all the many dark and secret places of that planet was the Golden Dome of Nalenq, the hidden city of the jungles where the green webs of the spider folk kept all mankind from the forest paths.

In that golden dome lived the Metal Emperor, who was worshipped not only as an emperor and supreme ruler, but as a god. Not human was he, but metal, and gigantic. He had always existed, first (according to his own word) on a planet called Earth, many thousands of years gone, when it was

a youthful planet and filled with a great science and a great civilization. Mu had been the name of the civilization, and there the Rif had lived, although none remembered except the Emperor. Long ago, to escape a disaster that overwhelmed Mu, the Rifians had escaped, in spaceships, led by their Emperor. Now, with the Rif planet insufficient in its resources to build such a civilization as had existed on Earth, the Emperor was going back. Agents, sent back to Earth, had reported it once more habitable, and in fact, possessing a great new civilization. Not more than a hundred years previously, the instruments of Rif had recorded strange emanations from Earth, which had stirred the Metal Emperor to action. There was life on Earth! It was now possible to return to the home planet.

But the strange emanations had turned out to be powerful ones, the result of a great war, wherein atomic energy was employed. It had almost wiped out that civilization the spies had discovered, but a new one, tremendously advanced in science, had emerged. If allowed to progress further, it might be impossible to invade and conquer. So the deed had to be done now or never. And the Metal Emperor had prepared carefully. Key to the situation was the capitol city, Mekka, and its chained volcano,

with its national atomic reactor providing unlimited power. Destroy that, and the planet would fall. And once fallen, the Rif would again take up their abode on their ancient home, and the Metal Emperor would rule, as he had ruled ages before.

Sitting in his spaceship, the Emperor reflected on the results of his opening skirmish. He'd sent a fleet of invading warships, and in a great space battle, they had been repulsed. The armadas of the Rif, accustomed to much raiding in their own System, had gone forth from the planet of war, had descended upon Mekka—and had lost the battle! No infant civilization, this!

The huge warships of the Rif had been driven off, and although the defenders of Mekka had never known the origin of the attackers, they had been alerted. In any future attack, the Metal Emperor knew one thing—Mekka had to be destroyed, with its central power plant, to ground and render impotent her air fleet and her armies. This, now, was the vital attack. If it succeeded, the Earth was helpless. And it would succeed—for the volcano had been primed! Nothing on Earth could halt the holocaust that would follow.

Also, when his armies landed, they would fight with a ferocity

beyond imagination, for after the first defeat, the Metal Emperor had crushed the lives out of many generals, many chieftains, many famous warriors, upon the altars of his wrath. They would die rather than retreat once more, full knowing the fate that defeat would mean to them.

Many were the younger Rifs who grumbled at the ancient cruelty of the Metal Emperor, for they felt that in this day of the machine, such dark and evil things should not be. But their grumbling went unheard, or was heard and caused their deaths.

MEKKA! The mechanical city! Mazhart, heart of the Mazarind clan, ruler of Mekka by popular vote, stood combing his curly black beard before the great round mirror that was not a mirror, but the polished receptor plate of his private penetrating ray and central command installation. Turning his sleek head to admire his noble and truly handsome appearance, he wondered if any thought him too young to rule a great city? But was not Mekka queen of the world under his rule? Was not peace a thing of years' duration since the repulse of the mysterious Rif from outer space, some undiscovered planet away? Were they not alerted and ready for any repetition?

And was it not all his work, his alert foresight, his support of the scientists who had made Mekka great?

Satisfied, he put away the comb, turned from the big mirror—and found himself facing an individual who had entered without sound. He retreated one step in complete amazement, for this man was no one he knew, yet he was as familiar as the image in his own mirror! In fact, it *was* himself, to all practical purposes; the same eagle eye bright above the straight nose, the same luxurious red lips, the same strong cheekbones, the same curling black beard. Himself, even to the shining black metal-cloth fitting sleekly over the muscled shoulders, accentuating the powerful thighs with inwoven gems in patterns of the Mazarind flower, the gentian. Identical, from top to toe, it was evident the man had made his way in here by impersonating Mazhart.

The only detectable difference lay in the needle-ray he carried in his hand, the tiny opening in the blunt muzzle staring at Mazhart like an hypnotic eye. Mazhart reached backward for the toggle switch of his mirror ray. At least the thing would automatically connect him with the central exchange and the operator would observe and take action

KAY Lin, current favorite of the ruler of Mekka city, was a woman built on a generous pattern. Her skin was that translucent milk-white found only in certain red-haired types. Her hair, a bright copper made more vivid with a dye, lay in generous masses of ringlets about a strong but shapely throat. Big-framed but graceful, her body was sleekly covered with that layer of velvet-soft flesh which is the possession of the most feminine of women when in perfect health and the flower of their youth. And Kay Lin was boisterously healthy, and likewise young enough to delight any eyes.

Just now she was intent upon her own beauty, repeated before her in a mirror similar to Mazhart's—for it was a gift from him, and was equipment denied any but the most favored people in the city. She had just awakened, and sat clad only in a filmy sleeping garment which she had slipped to her shoulders so that it lay in a soft cloud over the proud arches of her hips, leaving her unbelievably beautifully formed breasts completely bare.

The huge machine of which the mirror was only the visible part, was supported between the beaks of two great red metal birds. The controls were concealed by the metal feathers, of which they were

a part. Beneath the floor the great dynamos hummed a silent song of waiting power. For Mekka was a city of rays, and nearly every moment of the inhabitants' active day was taken up in some use or other of the myriad of wave-lengths at their disposal. Nothing but was done by means of rays. There were the stimulating pleasure rays; the beams which gave them instant vision into any distance of the city built in and at the base of the mountain; the healing rays which gave them the very life-force itself.

Kay Lin's installation was peculiar in but one respect: it was in continual connection with Mazhart's home over a fixed beam, requiring no focus adjustment, so that but a flip of a switch gave them instant contact with each other, a contact which, because of the pleasure rays, was sometimes very interesting indeed.

But now, at this instant, Mazhart's startled hand, unconsciously moving in an habitual way, flipped the switch connecting him to his beloved, Kay Lin, rather than the switch alongside, which would have connected him to the central command. On such little errors do the lives of men sometimes depend.

Yet, it was not Kay Lin's face that appeared in the mirror, but the back of her head—for in that same instant a young and muscu-

lar young man had burst open the door and plunged into her boudoir, and she had swung about.

Her striking eyes (tinted by a dye injection to a more startling shade of blue best calculated to contrast with her white skin and copper hair) fixed in fascinated and not unpleased surprise upon the intruder's rugged face. His whole bearing was that of intense pre-occupation, or repressed excitement.

Neither of them saw the repeated image of Mazhart and his double, nor the deadly needle ray half concealed in the double's hand. Neither of them noticed the hiss of the discharge, nor the body of one of them slumping out of view within the mirror-screen—and with good reason, for Kay Lin had her back to the mirror, while the young man had his eyes implacably chained upon the beauty of Kay Lin.

ALLOWING herself the proper long instant of surprised immobility, Kay Lin reached embarrassedly for her dressing gown, pulling it loosely about her nude shoulders, nor noticed that her elbow struck the feathers of the great red bird, switching off contact with Mazhart. And, which she carefully failed to conceal aught but her shoulders, she covertly reached for another feather and depressed it.

An invisible beam sprang from the floor upward into the face of the young man, holding him motionless. And instead of Mazhart's death-scene upon the mirror, there now appeared the thought images of the young man, laid bare by the probing power of the forbidden mental ray.

Kay Lin turned aside from him so that she might watch both the young man and his thoughts, as they flashed across the mirror's bright surface. She turned up the power to a forbidden strength, fixing rigid control upon him. Such power was permitted officially only to the police during emergencies. But Kay Lin knew she would be immune from criticism, nor cared if she were. Caught like a fly in a trap, his inner self was but a waiting comfit box for Kay Lin to open at her leisure.

She turned away and began to comb her coppery hair as she suggested question after question, violating all the ethics of polite society by prying open the very soul of the young man. On her lips was a mocking smile. Did not the man deserve what he was getting, bursting in thus upon her privacy? And she deliberately suggested questions to which the answers would be most embarrassing, and her eyes lighted with extreme interest at some of the answers. As she

watched, she grew desirous to know who he actually was.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" asked Kay Lin. Helplessly his mind began to tell her his story, as it had happened to him, in actual picturization on the screen . . .

Kay Lin, who now learned he was Jac Azad, Engineer of the Third Tier of the Thermal Patrol, saw him glide upon a levitor sled toward his post in the offices directly beneath the Vulcana. Suddenly he jerked back the drive lever. The sled dropped to its runners with a screech of steel upon stone, ran across the polished floor for yards among the fantastic mechanisms of the Grot of the Magic Hands.

This was a section of underground factories, directly connected to the power outlets of the Vulcana, where endless aisles of machines toiled and built a steady flow of fabrications from numberless materials. Boxes, barrels, decorative fabrics on great looms, metal sheets bent swiftly into all manner of shapes—being stacked or woven or assembled, and without a workman in sight. Every visible operation, however, was performed by a pair of life-like floating hands apparently unsupported by any material means.

These hands were really metal, under automatic magnetic force

control, so built that the whole vast space seemed inhabited by invisible workmen, tireless and infinitely accurate, whose hands alone could be seen. It was an illusion contrived by the inventor of the basic machine at work there, a machine whose moving parts conquered friction by floating in powerful supporting magnetic fields; fields manipulated in predetermined patterns by an extension of the principle by which a television beam is manipulated within the tube to form an image. The moving metal parts passed through intricate magnetic field patterns of weaving or construction whose design was itself a science and a trade among the men of Mekka.

But Jac Azad stood only for an instant watching the awesome mystery of the creating hands. To him it was no mystery, but a somewhat outmoded robot factory. More interesting was a spurt of almost invisible vapor from a crevice in the polished stone walls. That insignificant spurt of vapor had caused every nerve of his body to scream an alarm of peril.

JAC stood watching it until his eyes adjusted to the dim lights, then he put his hands to his head with a groan of despair. Newly formed, high in the wall face, the angry crack angled across the mir-

ror-bright polished rock! He would be sent to the jungles along with most of his comrades of the Thermal Patrol for this! Only negligence or worse could have allowed such a disaster!

He leaped back to the sled more swiftly than he had gotten off, a vicious warrior's oath crackling from his lips (and Kay Lin, watching his image on her mirror, put her shapely hands to her ears), and the levitor sled sped away. A second later and a mile away, it settled beside a big red alarm box. Jac pulled the great general alarm lever. Then he began trundling out the rolls of woven metal hose before even the repair robots stirred from their wall niches. Within minutes a score of the mechanical statue-like metal men had moved ponderously to help him, and his immediate superior, a dark-browed young giant named Dee Atzin, arrived to take charge.

"I'll take over, Jac. You get up to the main observation lab and run a ray tracer to the source of this thing. If that crack is clear through to the Can itself, instead of just a burst pipe near the mains, it not only means we are out of a berth on the Patrol, it means that all Mekka is in peril. Get going, and give me that hose. Trace that fissure, then go to the Mazarind! We've caught a Rif spy, and there

is no doubt this is some of their work!"

Dee Atzin turned away to direct the placing and bolting of the pressure plates to the rocks of the wall, and the pumping of the liquid thermal plastic into the fissure. This was a compound designed to harden in heat, remain liquid at normal temperature. Filling the fissure with the cement would only temporarily restrain the terrible forces that had caused the fissure.

On the screen Kay Lin saw Jac's mind leap a bridge of time now, back to the surprise attack of the Rif forces from space. She herself had not been concerned then in affairs of government, being in the southern hemisphere at a famous school for beauty culture. She had only a hazy knowledge of the attack, and she did not know how narrowly the Air Force of Mekka had averted disaster for them all. But she learned now.

As Jac's sled raced away toward the main laboratory under the fires of the Vulcana, his mind was busily matching bits of memory from that time with certain similarities of today's conditions, coming to the suspicion that this was not just sabotage, but the beginning of a new and more dangerous attack. His mind went back to those former battles, and with them to a young and lovely lieutenant of Wo-

men's Air Force Reserve, the beautiful Freya Velt.

KAY Lin, in spite of the fact she realized this was a situation of gravity, could not help being womanly, and more, could not resist this chance to lay bare the inner secrets of this young man's mind in relation to the pretty girl whose face kept flitting across the screen, intermingled with his racing thoughts. She flicked a second small beam to his motionless head, suggesting further thought concerning the girl. Jac's mind automatically and helplessly furnished the fact that the girl had died in the war.

A twinge of unexpected jealousy burned for an instant in Kay Lin's intense blue eyes; was repressed. Why should she care who this young man had loved? Also, he was not as young as he looked, she noted, in more ways than one. Not only had he seen action during the war with Rifia, it was obvious that he had been quite in love with the dashing Amazon of the Air Force. Not the sort of love of a Mazarind for a courtesan, but a tender, vital love . . .

Kay Lin brushed her unexpected reaction aside, noting that her heart was disposed to take unwonted interest in this young man with something of self-scorn; watched

while the images on the screen ran over the high points of his war career. She glimpsed a score of savage space battles, Jac's one-man fighter plunging and rearing with the terrible concussions of space bombs, his eyes blinded with the unchecked fires of atomic fission sweeping over the ships of his comrades.

All this while she held him in hypnotic subjection with her powerful neural ray, her natural instincts getting a sensual satisfaction out of so holding the fiery inner man here before her mind's eye, to do with as she wished. But at last she released him, but not before she had impressed upon him an unforgettable hypnotic compulsion to see her as she wished to be seen, a command she had used before with telling and entertaining effect.

As he relaxed, the tension of the subjecting flow of neural electricity subsiding, his own body taking charge again with its own energies, she knew that he was telling her the truth. The Vulcana, the great central heating and power plant of the frigid underground factory portion of Mekka, was about to blow up because of a secretly administered dose of fissionable material into the great outer cone of the fire. And he had come to her as the quickest way to Mazhart.

Somehow she was not in the least flattered that he had done so . . .

JAC Azad, coming out of the mental bondage that had been so complete, suddenly realized time was passing while he was engaged in an endless mental dalliance with this sex-minded female. He stood half-angrily on his feet, even though he saw her now as actually fine-charactered as well as superbly bodied.

"You should be flogged with a length of cable! There is no time for this sort of thing. Send for Mazhart at once, or I'll go to his home, even if it means death under these conditions!"

Kay Lin only smiled seductively, mockingly. "The great one will arrive here very shortly, Jac Azad, as he does every day—in about twenty swings of the pendulum of the clock there on the wall. I could not hurry him, I could not stop him. He is as regular as the magnetic flow of the time cable. And usually about as exciting. He comes and goes, Jac, with somewhat the same inexorable unconcern for the wishes of others that the sea exhibits in her tides. Make yourself comfortable, you have only to wait. I am not as dense as you think; I understand the urgency of the situation. But I could not help take advantage of

an opportunity ordinarily denied me—that of seeing exactly what makes a man tick inside. Most men are so bashful about the springs of ego, you know."

Jac sat, his eyes watching the great golden pendulum of the clock on the wall. Its swing was halted, then released, by impulses from a central source along a cable. The thing stopped and swung, stopped and swung, with maddening deliberation. Yet, in spite of his boiling anxiety, he could not keep his eyes upon the pendulum and off the sleek perfection of Kay Lin's physical opulence, still far from concealed in any way by the draping of her night dress. He could not help noting how her breasts rose and fell, rose and fell, in perfect cadence with the pendulum, but he did note the gleam in her eye as she so timed her respiration to attract his attention. Kay Lin had violated the ethics of the period mightily when she had held his mind open with her illegally powerful ray, when she had peered beneath his defenses into the secrets of his past. Not yet could he release his mind from its magnetic contact with hers. The burning sensuous images she had allowed to alternate back and forth between them still burned upon the now violent-hued curtains of his thought. This sensuous woman had

impregnated all his inner self with a consciousness of her vital femaleness.

Suddenly he associated the swing of the pendulum with her breathing. "Even in the face of annihilation for the whole city you cannot help being a woman, can you, Kay Lin?"

"You are welcome to the same privilege, if you wish to retaliate, Jac," she smiled suggestively. "You can use the ray on me."

"I wonder! If that is a promise, I will call upon you at some future date to fulfill it. I am sure there is no other mind whose memories would prove more diverting!"

At his answer, which could be construed as an insult, she began an angry retort, but at that instant a terrific lurch and shudder of the very floor beneath their feet cut short their half-angry, half-fascinated conversation. Shortly after came a blast of ear-painful sound. A fragile vase crashed from a niche to the floor at Jac's feet.

Following the shock of the explosion, there came a repeated thrum and twang as of great bow strings, sounds that told Jac the street patrols were firing the great rifles mounted at the street intersections. There was fighting in the very street outside Kay Lin's door!

SECONDS went by while they stared at each other, held by sheer surprise. Then Kay Lin, a poem of sudden swift motion, sprang for the opened door, reached it just in time to crash into a tall bearded form. The man staggered and would have fallen, but she embraced him with a cry of relief. He leaned upon her weakly, his boldly carved face now dull with shock, stained with dark dust from some near explosion.

"Someone threw a hand bomb at your gate, Kay. Stupid Rif, trying to assassinate me! If they only realized that no one else in charge could make as many plunders as I, they could have remained alive. The street patrol has become alerted and is firing on their hiding places."

Kay Lin asked swiftly: "What makes you think it is the Rif, Mazhart? There hasn't been a Rif caught in the city for years!"

The big man sank weakly on a divan and Kay Lin wiped the dust from his face with the soft fabric of her night dress.

"I think I know a Rif when I see one, Kay," he murmured, leaning back, his eyes shooting repeatedly to Jac, as if not sure whether to recognize him or castigate him. "They plotted to kill me here. We have caught a few of their spies today."

"It is more than a plot against your life, Sire!" said Jac. "If that was a Rif bomb, the two events are linked. It is a step in a plan to annihilate the city, for the Vulcana is about to burst!"

The man put his two hands to the divan, pushed himself forward, and peered at Jac as if the place was dark, which it was not.

"Just who are you, and how do you know the Vulcana is not her usual complacent self? And too, what are you doing in this particular boudoir at a time an attempt is made upon my life? It seems a bit opportune, to me!"

"There is no time for such petty thinking, Mazhart! The Vulcana has been sabotaged. Fissionable material has been dumped in from the stratosphere, unobserved. She is going up—just when can be known only to those who dropped the materials. By my observations, I give her about ten hours to complete eruption. That I am a member of the Thermal Patrol should be passport enough at this time to your concubine's bedroom—if that is necessary to reach you!"

"Couldn't you bring your business to my offices?"

"You weren't there, and everyone knows where else you are most likely to be."

The famous Mazarind^{*} stood up ponderously, his hands pressed to

his temples, his face averted. Jac decided he was an over-rated stuffed shirt, but hoped that his impression was due to the state of shock in which the concussion had left the ruler. He seemed to be in the grip of complex emotions, endeavoring to concentrate while he grappled with the natural anger at the attempt made upon his person and the fact that his dignity had been ripped at the seams. He glared about suddenly like a great bear looking for some one to blame everything upon.

"You Thermal troops have let the Vulcana get out of hand, then you come to me with a tale of an attack! Why, the Rif have not dared to show their faces in Mekka since their defeat!"

Jac noted Mazhart was contradicting his earlier statement, but ignored it. "There is no time for blame or any action but evacuation. It is too late to stop the culmination of the chain reaction now building up within the fire center. Please pull yourself together, Sire! The life of all our people is at stake, and you alone can give the order for a council meeting to order an evacuation."

THE big man sank as if bemused to the divan. Jac gestured to Kay Lin with a meaningful expression. She understood,

smoothed the ruler's brow with one velvet palm while she clucked motheringly into his ear. He relaxed upon the divan, and after long minutes of silence during which neither moved, murmured: "Kay, call the offices and command an immediate meeting of the officers of state. Make it imperative that all attend."

Jac stepped forward angrily. "Mazarind, that would play directly into their hands! You couldn't give a worse order if you were working for them. The council must be held by way of ray central as expeditiously as possible, and openly and for all to hear, or not at all! You could call more than half of them to a death that is undeniably waiting for them, by your own experience! The Rif are in the city in force; didn't that bomb and the fighting you hear outside tell you that?"

The huge man stared at Jac almost venomously. Seemingly his mind tried in vain to reason out what to do with this creature who kept telling his important self what not to do. His eyes drifted to the sidearm which Jac nervously fingered, and at last he roared out: "What would you have me do, you oracle of wisdom?"

"Connect the central command with Thermal headquarters under Vulcana. Let them give a gener-

al report to each officer in the city. Call a vote for evacuation or a try to put out the chain reaction now building within the cone, whichever is most feasible. Abide then by that vote, swiftly, with everyone alerted to the danger and its nature. Do it now, not when it is too late!"

After another precious minute of apparently labored thought, the flushed and angry face relaxed reluctantly. Mazhart sighed.

"Do it his way, Kay Lin. I seem to have lost my wits, it's true. Set things in motion for me. I can't seem to think at all."

Kay Lin went to her ray controls and did as she was bid. In a few short moments Jac was coupled to nearly every ray beam in the city, his voice going out to every important mind in Mekka. Mazhart had given him the needed permission to explain the sudden crisis.

"People of Mekka, we face annihilation in short hours! The Vulcana has been tampered with, and our heating plant has become an atom fission pile. Just what ingredients were dumped into the cone by a new plot of the Rif, we don't know, or canceling out their work would be simple."

In a low voice, Mazhart, whose form showed on the sending screen just behind Jac's, murmured:

"Explain what has to be done, how they should conduct themselves. I don't trust myself to speak now."

"As you all know, ordinarily our volcano is a source of heat and power in these normally frigid manufacturing excavations of ours, and is not difficult to control. But when the fires within the great central cone we call the 'Can' are made explosive by the addition of chain reaction materials of an unknown nature, then we can only experiment, hoping to strike the right damping combinations. Until we bring the increasing pressures of the Vulcana under our control again, it would be wisest for our city to be evacuated. Quietly, without panic, without looting or disorder, leave the city by the routes nearest to each of you. Do not all crowd onto the stem toward Old Philadelphia, nor rush into the trains for the forests—but each of you go as normally as possible to the nearest long route exit and leave Mekka. We will try to bring the Vulcana under control. If we fail, we will have only to build a new and greater Mekka. But if you remain in your homes, or if you disobey and cause riots that block off exits, it means that many of us will die in the holocaust of fire that is coming to Mekka. Now go: you have perhaps twelve hours, perhaps eight. Be careful and good-

bye."

JAC'S voice rang with a sad command, and he waved his hand with a finality of dismissal. Kay Lin cut the switch that connected her beam to the central command beam.

Mazhart, ruler of the doomed city, leader of his family, sat with a curious air of frustration, as if he would not have allowed the broadcast had he seen how to prevent it. He had not said a word to the people.

Jac spoke to him with an incisive, clear-cut scorn. "Now the Rif will attack, when the people get beyond the city's fixed installations of guns and rays. What do you plan to do to protect them then?"

The man stirred, his face twisted in an enigmatic smile. "Such emergencies are provided for in Central Command staff training. They have certain plans ready to put into instant action. It will be attended to without special orders."

"It might be effective," answered Jac, "to gather a group of volunteer fighting men and be ready to counter-attack when the Rif show their hand. This thing is well planned, and it is quite likely that ordinary methods will not suffice. I know where such men can be found. I have some ideas where the

Rif may lay in wait to massacre people. We might be able to scotch the Rif snake before it bites us seriously."

Mazhart eyed the young man who seemed so experienced a hand at struggle and death. "Where has one so young seen action before?"

Kay Lin answered for him. "This seemingly youthful person is a veteran of the former war with the Rif, having been in every major engagement. He piloted his own fighter jet in the last two great battles. Not only that, he was Halvor's chief aide in the counter-attack which was not expected to succeed, but did. To its success we owe the life of every person in Mekka. Yet what little publicity, what pitiful reward the people of Mekka gave to the men who accomplished it that you do not even know them!"

Mazhart nodded with an irritated motion of his hand. "I see. There is some reason and excuse in your proffering a Mazarind your advice, then." Mazhart took a pad from his pocket, scribbled upon it, tore off a slip of the tough plastic, gave it to Jac. "There is an emergency commission as captain of volunteer forces, whatever their number, that you are able to gather. Go ahead and make your attempt to foil the Rif plot. I am

first going to see that the Mazarind clan reaches safety, and then make sure everything is being done to damp out the atomic fires you say have broken out in the Vulcana. I know something about atomics, and I have never heard of a pile that could not be damped."

"But the Vulcana is not a pile, it is merely a vast fire in the rocks, fed by natural coal deposits. It has been primed with fissionable materials, and it is not equipped with built-in barriers, not intended for the necessity that has arisen. We can dump in cadmium, yes, but we can't get proper distribution in the irregularly shaped fire chambers of the Vulcana. You can't halt that chain reaction, and I am sure Mekka is doomed. If I had been in charge of the Rif forces, the materials I would have used would have been completely unstoppable under the given conditions."

JAC turned away from the obviously confused leader, stared for an instant at Kay Lin, who stood with her lips parted as if to speak, but said nothing. Then he went out the door on the dead run, clutching his emergency powers in his hand. He wondered if he could find anyone calm enough to listen to him or to care how many emergency powers had been

given to him.

"A capable young squirt," growled Mazhart to Kay Lin, "but somehow I detest him."

"One dislikes people for no reason, sometimes," murmured Kay Lin, turning away to hide a sudden tell-tale flush. In her heart she knew exactly why Mazhart disliked Jac Azad, knew that he sensed her own emotions toward the young man. Too, Jac had been none too polite to the ruler. She could not help feeling that Mazhart was showing himself an incompetent in an emergency, as well as a heartless sort of creature. He seemed worried only about the loss of power and prestige, and not about the people. She sighed, for a moment all thought of her own peril banished from her mind by a sudden realization that in grasping for fame and wealth by taking up with Mazarind, she had only gained notoriety and had lost her own self respect. But now, there was something she must do or lose even more. What did this man intend for her, if Mekka truly perished?

She seated herself before the mirror that was so much more than a mirror. She flicked the decorative feather that was the switch, turned the metal ornament that was the focus control, and the beam suddenly licked out upon

Mazhart, freezing him in an instant to subjection to her will, just as it had Jac Azad.

As she scanned his inner, hidden thoughts, a terrible series of scenes from an alien mind stole nightmarishly across the mirror. Kay Lin probed deeper, in a fog of horror that piled terror upon terror in her mind as she knew him for an interloper in the body of her own Mazhart! Rage began to burn over the horror within her. How long had this thing been posing as the ruler? Just who and what this monster was came clear to her at last, penetrating her benumbed understanding, and her rage flamed into a frenzy—a bright anger that moved her hand to the head of the great metal bird and pulled it down with a savage triumph. A lambent ray licked out over the man, a flame no more intense than her own flaming anger, spread and grew over the false Mazhart's face and limbs. His body became for an instant transparent as molten glass, and as swiftly melted away. There was left of the Rif spy only a bad smell and some wisps of ash of the metal fabric of his clothing. Kay Lin's hands sank trembling to her lap.

"Mazhart is dead!" she moaned. "Mekka comes leaderless to her doom, and I . . . what comes for me without Mazhart?"

As she sat there, dejection personified, far more beautiful than usual, her mirror glowed slightly and a whispering, metallic-sounding voice came to her from an imposed enemy ray. It mocked her softly.

"We have fooled you, Kay Lin! He whom you loved and now have murdered, was the real Mazhart. There was no substitution or impersonation! By reading my imposed ray instead of Mazhart's thoughts, you have seen in his mind what I placed there for you to see. How does it feel to be a murderess, to have killed the one you loved? What a patriot, what intelligence, how proud of yourself you must feel!"

For an instant Kay Lin was held in rigid horror, realization surging through her. Then she sprang with a scream to her feet and plunged out of the room, unable to bear the self-accusation of her conscience. She had been tricked by one of the oldest of thought-mirror deceits, the substitution of thought, and her only excuse was that she had forgotten to expect enemy tampering here in the heart of Mekka. It had not occurred to her she could be so completely fooled as to commit murder! She ran sobbing down the aisles of her home, in mental agony.

And behind her, on the polished surface of the mirror, a monstrous

metal form loomed for an instant, peering after her, something which, had she seen it, would have stayed her horror, but piled something even worse upon it. And through the room the humorless chuckle of the Metal Emperor echoed in rasping tones.

JAC Azad, coming into the city terminals in his levitor sled, found them filled with hurrying Mekkans. It was evident that panic flight was in their minds, and that orderly evacuation was going to be hard to achieve. Sleds darted hither and thither, or turned on their tracks as drivers remembered some valuable left behind—in a place considered immutable and time-proof, but now to be thought of as evanescent, to be gone on the morrow. Jac sped above the growing turmoil, in the express levels, where only official conveyances on special errands and the regular freight carriers were permitted.

He was on his way to a rallying place of his own. It was a club, membered by veterans of the Rif war, and older warriors who had lived through the wars of the beginning of Mekka, after the great war that had destroyed the old civilization. As he went, the sorrow-to-be, the gathering weighty peril for each of these handsome men and lovely women below him, for

each chubby angelic babe, for each gangling youngster, was like an increasing pain in Jac's chest as full realization of the doom of Mekka came to him. A far-off shudder ran through the rocks at regular intervals, and Jac knew, if the others did not, that that shuddering was the shock waves of the increasing atomic reaction building up in the Vulcana's fiery heart. Interspersing this almost inaudible but increasingly fearful shudder of the rocks was a far-off intermittent twang and thrum and twang again of the big mounted rifles, fighting off some attack in one of the city tubes. Jac suspected that this warfare in the distance was the feint attack, designed to draw off the defense of the doomed city to some point which would leave the nerve center of the city undefended. The real attack would come only when such feints had been successful, and after the exploding Vulcana had destroyed the factories and the city's fighting potential, its fixed installations.

"Without a whisper of warning the bloody Rif have got this far toward the death of us all!" Jac cursed to himself. "This damned Mazhart is probably the greatest fool ever to hold the helm of Mekka, or of any other city. He has probably been keeping all warnings quiet on the assumption that they

were the prattle of alarmists seeking to discredit his regime."

THE trickle of early evacuees grew rapidly as Jac's sled sped across the city. A steady stream of vehicles flickered beneath his own and beneath these, along the footways, more and more people were hurrying, carrying bundles of necessities, wrapped in rich tapestries and other fabrics they considered indispensable to their future. As this throng grew in turmoil, Jac realized that not all of them would reach a rendezvous with some vehicle of some friend or relative. This growing conviction that the city could never be evacuated in the short time left was made more certain by a sudden shock and a splitting of the rock wall that cracked with a noise like thunder, throwing out a cloud of burning gas which flickered and went out.

It was this incident that made him see the scene that drew his speeding sled to a stop and a dive toward the tunnel floor. Here the walkways along the side were filled with hurrying figures. The sudden flare of brilliant red light from the gases emitted by the volcanic crack had given Jac a glimpse of a scene on the walkway; struggling figures about one central figure playing about with a bright wand. It was a weapon from which the surround-

ing figures leaped back, only to come in again.

Jac halted his sled just above the heads of the group. There were a half-dozen dark-clad men, and in the center, one silver-clad young woman. Her legs were cased in scaled metal hose, her hair a mass of tossing midnight about her tense, anger-flushed face. She was breathing hard, but the wand in her hand pulsed with electric flame. Jac recognized it as an animal trainer's defense weapon, harmless but numbing in its effects. Jac called down.

"What's the trouble, lion-tamer? Can I be of any help?"

The men glanced up, aware of him now. One slunk away into the shadows and took to his heels, another tugged at a gun in his short coat. But Jac flicked his own needle-ray from its holster and showed the man its muzzle. He dropped his hands to his sides, stood irresolute. As he turned away, the others joined him, and they hurried off, leaving the woman standing alone. The wand of ruddy flame in her hand was no brighter than her grateful eyes and flushed face as she turned her head upward to Jac.

"Can I come aboard, soldier? They wanted me to accompany them to a place of safety. Safety, with them, hah! I think not."

HER voice was a clear, sharp contralto. Jac could imagine it

cracking with command as she put a monster of the jungle through its paces for the entertainment of a crowd of thrill-seekers. He lowered the sled to her side. She stepped aboard lithe and supple, and her strength of hand as she seized the fore rail to settle in her seat gave Jac a queer thrill of admiration such as no female had ever aroused. It was very odd to admire a woman for strength and agility, and at the same time feel drawn by the softer feminine qualities so apparent on her flower-petal cheeks, in her deep midnight eyes.

"What is the matter with the Vulcana soldier? Is it as bad as the announcers made out?"

"It's worse!" growled Jac, rocketing the sled up through the speeding traffic and forward again at full speed. The animal trainer gave a gasp at his daring, and Jac smiled.

"Don't tell me that a levitor sled can thrill you?"

"I don't mind the biggest cat out of Africa, but speed gives me butterflies. What do you mean, it's worse? Is the city really going to be filled with lava?"

Jac waved below. "Plenty of those people hurrying to get passage out of the city aren't going to make it! What is your name?"

"It wouldn't mean a thing to you; it's a stage name. You may have seen my billing as 'Armora,

the Fearless'. My real name is Jill Lang. My family have been on the stage for generations, and I was born on the road. My father was Lou Lang, the greatest stunt flier ever thrilled a crowd by risking his neck. But the jets got him in the end. You can't stick at that game when your nerves begin to slow up, and he did. He was killed in an exhibition flight over Chicago."

"I remember him," said Jac. "I was there with Darreg with the Space Patrol during the Rif war."

"You knew Darreg? I knew him when I was a kid. He used to visit our tent on the Midway."

"I knew him the way a pilot knows a general, from a respectful distance. That's different from being dandled on his knee."

"He and Dad used to talk ships until all hours. I use to fall asleep at their feet, like a dog."

"So we have mutual friends, Miss Lang. I'm called Jac, which is short for Jac-alin. My mother wanted a girl. My family name is Azad, the north branch. But the family money in the western clans has something to do with my need for a job. I inherited none of it. So I make a living with the Thermal Patrol, engineer third tier on the official papers."

"You should be on duty at the Vulcana. Are you deserting in the face of danger? They'll have you

shot!"

Jac flushed a little at the sudden scorn in her face. Her voice had chilled instantly to distant impersonality.

"I'm on a special mission, Miss Lang. It might be wiser if you remained at the Club on the chance you can get a hop out of the city. I am going to pick up some buddies and take a shot at the people back of this."

Her face changed again, this time to a warm interest and curiosity. Her voice slid down the scale to a husky note of apology. "Couldn't I go along? I can shoot, and I'm not exactly a coward?"

JAC set the sled down before the great sleeping stone dragon which was the symbol of the veteran's organization. It was an apt symbol, for these men were for the most part pilots of the fiery-breathed war-jets, and in time of trouble would come out of civilian life to take their place as riders of the flaming coffins that jets in war-time so often become.

As Jac came in the round hole of the doorway, made to resemble the entrance port of a big space liner, a chorus of cries greeted him.

"Here he is now, the great Maz-arind's chief counsellor!"

"Yeah, here he is. That spiel he made left out the most important

part—how did the Vulcana get that way? And why isn't Jac Azad at his post?

"Talk, Azad! You've got some explaining to do!"

The men were gathered around the centrally located newscaster, a large spherical screen which sat like a bubble of light in the middle of the lobby. It was the meeting place of the famous warriors of Mekka. Every man who had achieved any notice for courage in battle was invited to join, though any veteran who had been in battle was eligible. There were about two-score men gathered about the screen, within which the figure of the city's chief coordinator was visible. He was giving orders to some force of police in action, and this was one of the few emergency channels opened now to provide the central command with supplementary forces.

The veterans gathered were waiting for an assignment in the expected attack by the forces behind the eruption. The borings beneath the club house contained a full complement of fast ships, both sport and regular battle planes, owned by the members. The poorest of them, like Jac, owned levitor sleds for getting about the city, the richest owned as high as twenty planes of all kinds, from sport jets to full-armored battle craft—

and they were all very proud of the privilege given the club to own such fighting ships. They were really an auxiliary reserve organization, subsidized by the government to keep them ready for military action.

The full membership of the club was over five hundred, two hundred and more of whom were quartered in the club building itself. Jac wondered where the rest were, till the man at the spherical screens shifted the view and he saw the space over Vulcana, two miles up, was filled with fighting planes, while lancing down from space came huge troop-bearing space craft, their fore-jets blasting as they slowed to landing speed. The vast cone of the Vulcana made the scene lurid even in the darkness with an intermittent blast of fiery rocks, and a steady flare of flaming gases, reaching a half-mile into the air. It was a terrific scene and Jac could only mumble to the many questions being thrown at him.

"Special mission. I'm here to pick up a volunteer force. It's too late for the Thermal Patrol to do anything with the Vulcana. She's going to blow in a few hours."

"What's the mission, Jac? I might volunteer." Hugh Spear, a man who had seen action in the same outfit with him, spoke up. He was a squat man for a Mekkan,

but as broad as two of Jac.

"I had figured the Rif might be holed up in the new construction under the north slope. There are a lot of dwelling chambers built and no one even guards them. The whole place is empty except for the automatic borers and a few oilers who stay there to keep an eye on the machinery. I figured we might bottle them up before they come down on the city. But this landing on the South slopes of the cone makes me wonder if I was right."

"You're right, and you don't know it. I hadn't thought of the new borings! They are waiting till we swarm up to repel the surface attack, then they'll come out and mow down the city forces. It makes sense! Let's go take a look anyway. No one's going to send for us till they run into something they can't handle, and everything's under control so far except the broken heart of the Vulcana."

THERE was a terrific tension in the room as the veterans watched the Rif forces disembarking under fire, disappearing into openings in the side of the vast slope of the south shoulders of the Vulcana.

"They must know to the second when the Vulcana is due to blow, otherwise they would never trust an army to those tunnels," said

Spear.

"If we could hold 'em there, delay them, the Vulcana might do us a favor and take care of them," Jac muttered to Spear.

Jill Lang spoke up. "Jac, where is our fleet? They are making that landing with only a token resistance. There aren't a thousand fighters in the air!"

"Probably out in space fighting off the main force of the Rif. These transports have made a circle around the main engagement, perhaps unobserved by the main fleet. It's up to us to handle them until the fleet returns. You never know, in battle, just where and why everything takes place. You have to do a lot of guessing, and when you guess wrong, you get killed."

"You mean our fleet hasn't maintained contact? Doesn't anyone know where they are?"

"Sure, the brass in Central Command know where everyone is, but they don't tell every non-combatant and reserve pilot the details. We may never learn the true details of the very battles we are going to engage in during the next few hours. That's war, Jill."

Spear, who had been waiting for the answer to a message, was approached by a uniformed attendant of the club who handed him a armload of equipment. There were two rifles, the deadly needle-

ray rifles of Mekka, good up to five miles of 'scope vision. There were two suits of metal-cloth designed to shed the most dangerous emanations and everything except a direct hit with rays, and there were a score of tiny and various instruments some of which even Jac did not understand.

"Come on, Jac, let's take a look at the north borings," Spear shouted, setting off on a dead run for the escalator down into the hangar chambers beneath.

As Jac followed Spear, he noticed that Jill was running at his side. At his questioning look she murmured: "You didn't say goodbye so I figured you expected to take me along."

"Oh no! This is dangerous Jill! You had better stay here and cadge a ride out of the city. If we do run into Rif in the borings, we may not get back again."

"Nonsense. I'm a good pilot, and if you want to use those two rifles, someone will have to handle the levitor wheel."

Spear's armored fighter was no mere jet job, but had both jets and an interplanetary drive—an etheric vortice engine such as is usually used only in the large ships for long space flights. It had also an auxiliary levitor drive and lifter for surface work on any planet.

AS the trio clambered into the stubby, nearly cylindrical and unwinged ship, Spear flashed a beam into the club's coordinator chamber, requesting a tractor ray to follow their flight in case their deductions as to the location of the Rif forces were accurate and they were attacked and overwhelmed by superior numbers and could not return or report. Then he set the autopilot of the levitor drive, which device kept a ship centered in a boring, making it impossible to crash the walls. Without it all swift flight in the great subterranean factory network that was the life-blond of Mekka would have been impossible. As the ship lifted to the center channel of the main tunnel through the center of the Mekkan industrial area, it continually shifted aside with a disturbing suddenness to let pass the unending stream of traffic caused by the evacuation.

They sped across the emptying city. The sense of sorrow at all these people abandoning loved homes was constant and painful as they watched the milling throngs in the walkways boarding the passenger levitor platforms or making last minute purchases in the still operating provision automats. They were a beautiful people, light-hearted even in the face of the imminent fiery death about to

consume the city, and there were tears in Jill Lang's dark eyes as she watched them pass beneath; knowing that surely many of them would soon pass into the limbo of the past unless the luck of Mekka were tremendous. For with the forces of the Rif circling the southern half of the city, the main exists to the southward were already closed. The east and western ways would soon be closed, and unless the northern ways remained open, many of the people of the underground portion of Mekka would be bottled up in the doomed borings. Strangely, the reason for building the manufacturing portion of the city underground, a lesson learned in the Atomic War, was now proving to be erroneous and disastrous, by reason of the sabotaging of the Vulcana. The danger now was from within, not without.

The ship swung now into the empty north borings, where lay the partially finished new manufacturing areas which were not yet connected at the extremities with the regular network of tunnels. When finished, they had been planned to form a complete underground suburb of Mekka. The great new transport platforms lay unfinished all along the wide tunnel floors, giving a chaotic appearance to the scene. Tools and equipment lay scattered in all dir-

ections. Here and there a small service light burned over some throbbing machine keeping pressure in the air lines or pumping fuel to the temporary turbines. These tunnels were the safest in Mekka right now, as there were no heat pipes or power lines installed and no connection made to the vast inferno of the Vulcana.

"Jac and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water," said Jill, as if to herself.

Jac flashed her a glance. It had not occurred to him how their names jingled in the old rhyme. It gave him an odd thrill of kinship with this lean whiplash of feminine courage and too much ability to be perfectly feminine. She would make someone a perfect mate. One would never have to coddle her; she could take care of herself.

SUDDENLY a voice out of nowhere whispered in his ear. "Oh no you don't, Jac Azad. You won't have to think of such things!"

With these words his brain whirled dizzily and a hypnotic pressure on his senses brought him a completely overwhelming realization of the proxy presence of Kay Lin. He realized she had been keeping contact with him since he had left her chambers, and the thought of

this famous beauty, one whom the whole city looked upon as irresistible, had fastened her desires upon him was a sensation of delight and anticipation of transports to come — an anticipation which Jac knew was being suggested by Kay Lin's mind within his own, but which was no less irresistible in absorbing vistas of future passion because of that.

In answer to a suggestion by Kay Lin, he took the slip of vellum from his pocket on which Mazhart had written. Scanning it, he gave an exclamation of rage. For it was an order for his arrest as a spy, signed with both Mazhart's signature and a tiny mark beneath that he recognized as the old Rif symbol.

He did not hear Kay Lin's sigh of infinite relief as he scanned the paper. She knew now she had been right in killing the spy. It *hadn't* been Mazhart.

Jac turned to Jill to find she had been watching his sudden plunge into hypnotic absorption.

"Now who was that? Venus herself, by the look on your face."

"Just a friend." murmured Jac, his voice shaking a little.

"She would like to be more than a friend, and she has equipment only possessed by specially privileged persons, to be able to follow and reach you here. Who is

she?"

For some unaccountable reason, Jac felt defiant. "It was Kay Lin, the mistress of the ruler, Mazhart."

"Just a friend, eh?" murmured Jill, sensing his defiance.

He flushed. "I met her today for the first time, trying to get word to Mazhart that the Vulcana was about to blow up. I couldn't find him at his office, so I paid a social call on the most logical place to find him."

Jill looked knowingly at him and there was an exaggerated soothing note in her voice. "And she was impressed with the handsome soldier. Say no more. I understand."

"No you don't!" said Jac angrily. "I . . ."

Jill turned her attention to a map of the city which Hugh Spear had produced. Spear reached across and put his finger on the place where they were now. She nodded. Jac turned back to the side port, watching for some sign of Rif occupation. But the innumerable openings into the future dwellings of the workers were empty of any signs of life.

Spear, with his better vision from the transparent nose of the ship, saw something amiss in the dark tunnel, shot gas into the fore-jets, settling the ship to the rocky floor.

Quickly he rose from his seat at the controls, took one step toward the side port. At that instant a ray bolt slashed through the armor of the cabin and bisected the nose of the ship with a great splash of molten metal. If he had not risen, he would have been very dead now. Swiftly he bent over the control panel, pulled back the levitor lever and turned on the fore jets. The ship lifted and shot backward just as two more flaming bolts of energy split the air where the ship had been settled. Jac admired his quick decision. The ordinary man would have risen off the ground with a forward motion and been caught like a clay pigeon.

SPEAR flew the ship backward at full speed, then suddenly darted sideways and up a black tunnel without a light. He had shut off the dim cabin light in the meanwhile. As he set the darkened ship down on the rock again, a feat itself done in the dark only by the sharpest of flyer's instinct, Jill read off a communicator tape.

"Our tracer ray contact has seen the attack upon us. The operator assures us forces will be dispatched immediately to handle whatever was hidden there—and commanding us to return to the club of the Sleeping Dragon."

"How about that?" asked Spear of both companions. "Do we run back home now that danger appears?"

"Let's look around first and see what we can learn about their numbers," answered Jac. "It could be an imposed message and our tracer ray shorted out. But if it was, it wouldn't send us back. It just doesn't make sense."

"Everything in Mekka is mixed up—the Vulcana exploding is in itself an impossibility, but it is happening. The Rif must have been a long time preparing this coup."

"I say we scout this section on foot. We can keep out of sight, look around till we learn something."

Jac turned to Jill. "You stay with the ship. We'll look over the borings in this section."

"No you don't! I'm going along. Hide the ship in one of the empty chambers."

They slid the weightless ship within one of the empty dwelling chambers which still did not have its partitions installed, and closed the rough temporary wooden door on it. Then they set off on foot toward the section from which they had been fired upon.

They ascended a stairway, were advancing along a railed balcony overlooking a great central cham-

ber such as all dwellings contain, when a racket beneath them gave them pause. They stood, silent and alert, only to hear the noise of wheels and the hiss of high-powered levitors the steady burtle and murmur of a great force of men and equipment getting underway. Then they came into view.

There were great sleds loaded down with the heaviest type of ray cannon, manned and ready to fire—at least a hundred floated slowly by beneath them, followed by a number twice as great of one man sleds equipped with deadly needle-ray rifles mounted on swivels.

"We are too late," whispered Jac. "They are departing to attack the city from the north."

"They will run smack into our Sleeping Dragons!" said Spear. "Let's hope they are not asleep now!"

"If we could figure some way to muddle them up here as they gather to leave . . ." whispered Jill Lang.

There was little need of any effort to keep quiet. The rush and crush of the force beneath them drowned the place with echo upon echo of footsteps on the rock of the floor, with the jangle of loose chain against anchored cannon and the lighter ring of side weapons against harness buckle.

THERE was a deadly air of brutal, serious intent to kill in that gathering force, bedded here for no one knew how long, waiting for things to ripen in the city to the south. There was a sickening efficiency in the speed of their going in the grim-lipped set faces, like masks of death in the dim lights from the sleds' control panels.

"Get back in the tunnel," ordered Jac suddenly. Jill obeyed, but stood watching as he raised the weapon he carried, sighted at the high center arch of the domed chamber. Beside him, Spear raised a similar weapon and the two rifles hissed venomously together. From overhead the report of the explosive bullets was deafening, and down upon the entrance out of which the procession of man and weapons was coming, fragments of rock as big as men's heads rained down. Nothing of a size sufficient to more than worry them, but still, as Jill had suggested, enough to "muddle them."

Again they fired, this time at the key point of the arch over the entry-way, and the double charge of explosive pellets knocked a fragment of rock loose weighing at least a ton. It dropped down upon a heavy levitor sled, tipped it over on its side and blocking the whole doorway with its weight. With which success, Jack and Hugh

darted back from the railed edge of the balcony and sprinted up the passage behind, brushing against Jill as they passed, but not seeing her. She ran after them, but they were but misleading echoes of footsteps overhead, where they bounded up the stairways. These stairways were but narrow emergency borings, to be sealed up after the place was finished, useful only during construction before the levitor passages and usual means of getting about were installed. All Mekka buildings used a levitor beam for elevators, making anything placed in a vertical boring weightless so that it could be floated up or down. It was this which made their flight sensible, as nothing bigger than one man could follow up these narrow stairways. At the top they knelt, and Jill, panting after, nearly got herself shot before they remembered her.

"Well, we muddle 'em up all right! Now they will hunt us down like rats through these warrens, and your friends will arrive just in time to bury us." Jill was quite certain about it, and Spear laughed grimly.

"We're in no danger. They won't change plans for that, won't send more than a few men after us. We've only delayed them for seconds, but those seconds may be just what is needed to throw them out

of stride when the Dragons hit 'em."

As if in answer to his words there came a terrific hiss and sputter as of a gigantic fuse suddenly lit, and after it came a concussion, shuddering deafeningly about them as the air tore apart in the pressure. This was followed by a steady series of shocks as the ray rifles of some heavily armored craft went into action, splitting the rocks of the cavern with sudden heat.

How the encounter between their Sleeping Dragons and the concealed Rif forces came out, they were not to learn for as they turned to make their way to the front walls of the boring to see the battle outside through some air shaft or opening, a sudden light broke out upon them, a sugar-sweet female voice said mockingly:

"Ah, we have caught the spies who fired upon our caravan of death!"

They could see nothing but the blinding brightness of the spot of light directed upon them, but Jac threw up his rifle and let go a bolt at the light itself. The rifle was knocked from his grasp by a force beam even as it discharged. The pellet only shattered the roof overhead, letting down a rain of rock dust over the scene.

SPEAR dropped his own weapon, realizing there was no sense

getting killed when no resistance was possible. Jac stood wringing his painful hands, burning with the shock of the force ray. Jill merely smiled at the blinding light; she had faced so many spotlights it seemed quite natural.

The voice directed them to march ahead, and presently they brought up before a wide door, of rough wood. It was opened and they stepped through to find half a hundred women. Jac realized these were wives and sweethearts of the Rif forces, who expected to wait here till Mekka was destroyed, then join in the looting and celebrations afterward.

The woman who had captured them stood well behind them, still with her hand light and force beam pistol, and motioned them onward across the room. They were locked into a small dark closet, and left to listen to the chatter of the Rif camp-followers.

Jac uttered a muffled curse. "Captured by women!"

"We're still alive," Jill's voice was light, half laughing, half bitter.

"But better dead. Now we'll be taken back to the Rif cities even if they are defeated, and spend the rest of our lives working as slaves for people we detest."

Spear sat down against the wall, unlatched his empty weapon belt, made himself comfortable. Jac

bent to the tiny slit of light from the doorway, peering for a chink to look out at the Rif women. Jill shoved him aside.

"No need your watching those creatures! I'll do it for you."

"It is just as well you do," muttered Jac, sitting down beside Spear. "It would be a sad fate indeed if I were to fall in love with one of them."

"I wouldn't put it past you," said Jill, grimacing.

In the closet, the air grew humid, almost unbearable. Jill kept her eye glued to the slit of the door; Spear and Jac sat motionless, waiting for whatever unpleasantness was in store for them. Jill occasionally gave little sounds of disgust.

Then a broad broom of rays swept hissing across the scene outside. The women screamed and ran. The sounds of their feet thudding off down the passages was all that was left of them. Jill gave a cry of delight, and for the faintest fraction of an instant their own bodies felt the intolerable pain of that ray before it followed the fleeing women. Someone had pierced the defenses of the place with a neural wave, generating maddening impulses of an unbearable pain in the bodies of all it touched.

The husky, throaty voice of Kay Lin came to Jac's inner ear, murmuring: "I have found you, Jac

Azad. A prisoner of the Rif camp women. I am surprised and disappointed." The faint tinge of mockery in her tones caused Jac to flush in the darkness, but he only grinned at the invisible woman. He knew his own face must be looking out of her mirror in her boudoir. He could imagine her quite clearly, sitting there as if the whole city was not aboil with chaotic activity, fleeing citizens, rumbling fires beneath, marching armies and strafing planes.

"Did your patrol run off and leave you?" whispered Jac, curious as to how it happened the Mazarind had not seen that she was safely out of the city by now.

KAY Lin made a split-second decision and lied. "Believe it or not, Jac Azad, our ruler seems to have done just that. No one knows where he has gone or how to reach him. His family will have to exile him to save the reputation of the Mazarind Clan. Mazhart is no longer the heart of the clan, if I read the cards right."

"Kay Lin, if we could get out of this closet, we could join you. Together we might find a way to strike at these Rif armies, or at least make a sensible exit ourselves before the Vulcana consumes the empty city."

"It is far from empty. There is

a pitched battle going on in the western tunnels, and the Vulcana tremors mount steadily on the dials in the seismograph office. The city is calmly evacuating otherwise, and a large part of the Rif invasion force has been sealed off from the city blasting down the western doors. The openings remaining are where the battle is taking place."

"The real danger, then, is the Vulcana itself. Find out exactly when the Rif technician expect her to let go with the big blast. You can find it out if you look into a few Rif minds with your pretty plaything. They must have been briefed on how long a time they have to loot the city."

"I have already done that, and more, Jac Azad. The time is about one hour from this instant, and they are frantically trying to get out of the city themselves. But the battle has blasted down so many gates, a lot of them aren't going to get away in time."

"Good!" cried Jac, at which Jill and Spear shook him, thinking he was asleep and dreaming.

"There's nothing good about this hole, wake up!" cried Spear into Jac's ear.

"I'm awake," said Jac. "Hold still a minute. I'm in contact with Kay Lin. She is working to release us, and she will come for us. The Vulcana is due to blow up in an

hour."

Even as he spoke, a heat ray began eating at the doorway. The wood flared, blackened, fell to ash. Within moments they were free and racing down the passage outside.

"Make your way toward my place along the main routes. I will start out in my own private plane to pick you up," ordered Kay Lin in Jac's ear. "Then we will leave this madness behind us and seek calmer climes for our future."

As the ray left them, Spear grinned at Jac. "It's right handy to have so many women worried about you, eh Jac?"

Jac only looked serious. "I don't feel that we should run away and leave Mekka just because the whole place is doomed to go up in smoke."

Jill spoke up. "There won't be time for more than that, Jac. We can die nobly running around like ants on a crushed anthill, or we can get out and be sensible. After all, you've got to think of your girl friend!" There was derision in her voice, and again Jac flushed.

They set out on foot, running along the corridors toward the place they had hidden the plane. They found it efficiently sabotaged by the Rif women or soldiers. In was useless to anyone now.

THEY went on down the avenues of darkness toward the inhab-

ited portion of the city. Somewhere they hoped Kay Lin would run into them. It was their only chance of escaping from the endless warrens of the factory-city. The whole under-rock was now shuddering deeply, constantly, with an increasing reverberation which they realized was the atomic explosions in the far-off crater, building up to a climax as the various materials deposited by the Rif reached their critical mass and fissioned.

"Part of that concussion," panted Spear, running heavily beside his lighter-bodied companions, "is probably bombs by our own forces seeking to bottle up the Rif by blowing down the cavern roofs. If they can get 'em sealed off in time, they will be destroyed by their own deviltry. That will be justice!"

"I can't run away while our outfit is still fighting, Hugh. We've got to get to the front and report. They will need us. Once out of the city in Kay Lin's ship, we've got to stick close and fight with the rest to the last second."

"We can't do a thing without a ship, man. We'll have to take over Kay Lin's ship by force, if she insists on running to a lover's rendezvous with you."

Jac's face set in grim lines as the long gray sport ship of the rich woman settled to the cavern

floor in the center of the now deserted North highway. They ran up to the ship, but the entry port—a curiously shaped door resembling a shield with four points on top—remained closed. In their ears they could hear her voice over the ray with which she was checking them.

"Oh no you don't, you two patriots! You are too fiery for me. I want none of your last ditch heroism. If you come aboard, it will be on your word of honor to take my orders. I have a plan of my own, and information you are unaware of. You're not setting me afoot in the forest outside the city while you run off to fight a war that was lost before it started."

She had taken a look at their thoughts from habitual caution and surprised their just-formed plan to take over her ship. Jac frowned and Spear grinned.

"Okay, sister, you win. Open the door and we'll behave like little lambs."

With which promise, Kay Lin swung the door wide and they stepped into the upholstered sleekness of her richly emblazoned sport flyer. Gray leather seats, polished wood paneling, a multiplicity of gleaming gadgets, and beyond the glass paneling between the pilot's seat and the cabin, Kay Lin's lushly lovely face a little

grim. She did not open the heavy glass panel between the cabin and herself, but motioned them to seats and took off, screaming away from Mekka Industrial City up the exact center of the tunnel. Behind them the narrowing perspective of the great bore suddenly gleamed with a light brighter than the sun, and the ship lurched as a blast of air struck them from the rear. Fire and heat rays shot past the ports. The ship became hot as a furnace inside from the sudden blast of the distant explosion—and each of them knew that Mekka was no more, even as they plunged out of the bore and flashed across the smoking ruined city outside.

"If you two had had your way, we would have been back there just in time to get the full force of that," came Kay Lin's voice.

But Jac and Spear and Jill were not listening. Instead they were staring down at a rapidly vanishing scene behind them. There towering many hundreds of feet into the air, smashing buildings with grotesque metal arms, and ponderous metal legs was a figure that was so like a man that it staggered their imaginations.

"A robot giant!" exclaimed Jill.

"Something new for the Rif," said Spear, "It will be hard to stop things like that, but they can't have many of them."

KAY Lin's voice came to them, as they zoomed out of sight of the city over the mountain and out beyond, over the silent forest that covered the area between the city and the sea. "That is the only one and it is not a robot, not exactly."

"What do you mean, Kay Lin?" asked Jac. "How can it be not 'exactly' a robot?"

"That is the Metal Emperor, the ruler of the Rif, and it is not a robot, because it has a human mind."

"A human mind," breathed Spear. "How can that be?"

"It is metal, but in its skull case is a brain, an ancient brain many thousands of years old."

"But the size of that head," cried Jill. "Surely, it need not be that large to house a human brain."

"It needs to be that large to house *this* human brain," said Kay Lin. "I know, for I probed it with my 'pretty plaything,' as you called it."

The speedy ship was now over the ocean, flashing forward at top speed, and Kay Lin set the automatic controls, then stepped into the cabin with them.

"It is a long story," she said, sitting down on a leather-covered divan. "If you'll be patient, I'll tell you about it, and what we intend to do."

"But where are we going?" asked Jac. "Why flee in terror over the sea, this way?"

"Listen, and I will explain. In order that you might understand, I will have to go back to the very beginning. First, Mazhart was murdered by a spy, whom I later killed myself, when he came to my apartment, no doubt to do what he could to aid the invasion and try to track down more of the Mazarind Clan." Kay Lin glossed over the real truth of her experience which still caused her some perturbation in spite of the fact she had been justified in her action

"In my search, immediately afterward, for the Mazarind, I checked back on the recording tape of my television mirror, and saw a picture of that great metal monster you saw back in Outer Mekka. Somehow it had been directing the spy to me, and managed to get a message to him over my own apparatus when I was not looking

..." A bit of a flush stole over Kay Lin's face at the bit of fiction she was weaving into her otherwise truthful story, but she went on without otherwise betraying the fact.

"I traced the signal back, and found this Metal Emperor, as the Rif call him, approaching Earth in his giant space ship. I pried into his mind, just as I did into

yours, but not with the compulsion that can be achieved over a mere human mind. I did it secretly, and I learned an amazing story.

"A long time ago, many thousands of years before our present civilization, the Rif were inhabitants of Earth."

JAC Azad gasped. "Inhabitants of Earth! How could that be?"

"It is true, nonetheless," Kay Lin went on. "They were a highly mechanized race, living on a continent that has come down to us in legend as Mu, in what is now the Pacific Ocean, which is where we are heading . . ."

"But why?" interrupted Spear.

"Never mind that now, suffice it to say that we are not just fleeing in terror, but have a definite objective in view. But to go on, this Rifian civilization was a vastly mechanical one, and, then, just as they really are now, they were enslaved to their machines. In fact, their ruler was a machine, with a human brain, grown greatly by its defeat of death and age through its separation from a physical body, just as that monster you saw destroying Mekka."

"Just as, you say?" asked Jac, sensing her implied meaning.

"Exactly. The ancient Rif were ruled by a Metal Emperor, but there were more than one of these giant

robots. A whole race of them existed then, and the humans were but the merest slaves, and would eventually have been entirely eliminated. But a great disaster struck this planet, a disaster that sank the continent of Mu into the depths. But it was not a disaster that came too suddenly. It was prepared for, and one great spaceship escaped, bearing one of the metal giants, and his crew of human Rif slaves. It had been planned that each of the giant robots would escape in a separate ship, with his slaves, then when Earth was habitable once more, they would return. When I probed the mind of the Metal Emperor, I found that he had been the sole survivor. None of the other ships reached their pre-planned destination, and he was marooned for thousands of years by the damaging of his spaceship, and the difficulty of reconstructing his mechanical civilization. There was a revolt of the slaves, and on their new world, two factions sprang up. For centuries they waged wars, and finally the Metal Emperor triumphed. Then he built up his civilization again, and finally, was able to send scouts to Earth to determine if it was once more habitable, because Earth is a far superior planet, and he wished to return.

"And so he found it. And so he planned to come back. His first

attack was repulsed, through underestimating our mechanical status, largely because our own atomic war had forced our true mechanical civilization underground, where he failed to find it in its proper perspective. Now, in his second attack, he has succeeded. The Metal Emperor has returned to the planet of his birth, bringing his Rif slaves with him, and it is his intent to wipe Earth clean of its present population, and resume once more what he considers his rightful place as supreme and sole ruler."

"It is incredible," said Jac. "But we saw him, and your story must be true. And because it is, there seems little hope for Earth now. With Mekka destroyed, the other smaller cities will fall. There seems nothing we can do."

"At least not here," said Spear. "Why are we plunging out over the ocean to nowhere? I say we must go back and fight, no matter how hopeless it seems. Even if we escape, the Metal Emperor and his Rif slaves will eventually seek us out, and that will be our end. I, for one, do not set so much store by a period of dalliance at love, as by an honorable death. We must go back. Jac, I am surprised that you would even consider the proposition of Kay Lin, no matter what her physical charm. Are you a traitor for so small a cause as a

bit of perfumed flesh?"

"Stay!" came Kay Lin's voice harshly. "Don't condemn my flesh before you know my mind! It is true that I was Mazhart's mistress, but I am also human, as you and no traitor, nor so dishonorable as you seem to think. We will continue to our destination."

"And that is what?" asked Jill, a dangerous light flaring into her dark eyes.

KAY Lin eyed her almost hostilely. "A small deserted island paradise in the southern Pacific, if you must know," she said stiffly.

"I thought so!" said Spear harshly. "And I do condemn you!"

"Thank you," said Kay Lin. "And you, Jac? Do you also condemn me without a hearing?"

Up from his subconscious came the hypnotic compulsion that still governed him in respect to his thoughts about Kay Lin. "No, Kay Lin, I do not. I will listen to you, if you will speak. After you have spoken we shall see."

"Then listen, all of you. With my 'pretty plaything' I managed to pry one interesting bit of information from the Metal Emperor's mind, a piece of information I have already given you—that there were originally more than one robot giant. As I thought about that,

I began to wonder if the Metal Emperor were really the original ruler of Mu, or if he was a lesser one. And I wondered about all the others, whether they had actually died in space unable to reach their destination. And I remembered the ancient legends of Mu, which predict that one day she will rise again. They couldn't have come from this particular metal giant, out of contact with Earth, so I reasoned that not all of them left the planet, and likewise, not all of them died, or their memory would have died with them. So, with my ray, I sought an answer to the secret. Deep down in the depths of the Pacific I found it."

Jac and his two comrades stared at her. "What did you find?" they asked in unison.

She smiled tantalizingly at them. "I found—the *real* Metal Emperor. And I got the *real* story. Believe it or not, that ancient civilization of metal giants still exists, on the bottom of the Pacific, miles beneath the surface, a race of immortal metal men, with enormous human brains, wise beyond all belief, perfectly aware of the life on the surface, but content to remain where they are. But because of the weakness of my transmitting ray, I could not contact them. So, that is why we make this trip. In this ship, I have an exact duplicate of the

'plaything' of my boudoir, and with it I hope to contact that Metal Emperor and enlist his help."

Jac and Spear and Jill sat stunned. The enormity of the facts that Kay Lin had related to them were almost beyond belief, but yet they must be true.

"Kay Lin," said Spear, "I must apologize. You are an infinitely clever and brilliant woman, to go along with your great beauty. And I must confess that you have discovered the only way we can defeat the Rif, and restore Mekka and all Earth to its former glory. But are you sure you can contact the Metal Emperor, and if you do, will he help us?"

Kay Lin looked at him. "Even the Metal Emperor has a human brain. And being human, I feel sure that I can do to him as I have done to many others. Perhaps my peculiar fleshly charms may have some practical use after all."

Jill Lang looked at Kay Lin a bit strangely, but then she spoke. "Perhaps what you have said is not all egotism. In any other case, I would hope so, but in this, I am all for you. But I wonder if the Metal Emperor will be anywhere near the big bowl of mush that is Jac Azad?"

Jac flushed, turned to her, about to give an angry retort, when he saw her smile. Instead he grinned

sheepishly. "I would expect such a remark from a lion-tamer."

Now it was Jill's turn to flush, and Kay Lin turned a lingering glance upon Jac Azad that left him quite flustered.

HOURS later Kay Lin set the ship down on a coral islet in the vast desert of shining water that was the Pacific. Here, she said, it rolled over the ancient land of Mu, and far below, forever free of ordinary men's probing adventurings, was a mechanical civilization that had never before been equalled throughout the cosmos, a race of mechanical giants, living a life forever bulwarked against interference, impervious to outside influence, and content to remain in its impregnable fortress of water.

The three Mekkans watched anxiously as Kay Lin set her apparatus into action, sending its probing rays down into the dark water, down, down until, miles deep, as seen on the polished mirror, not even fish were visible, only perpetual blackness, lighted only by her rays. At last a tremendous scene burst into view. Here was a city! A tremendous bulking city of imperishable metal, and in it moving figures, giant figures—metal men!

"It's true!" exclaimed Jill. "And I am proud to be a woman, if only to be able to share the glory of

your achievement in guessing the truth and having the mental ability to find it, Kay Lin."

Kay Lin flashed her a glance of appreciation, then turned back to her control panel. As she flicked lever after lever, at last on the mirror a single great building was focused, and finally, a great room inside that building. And here, sitting on a great throne in an attitude of meditation, was a metal giant fully a mile tall, and with a brain almost unbelievable in size. And Kay Lin spoke to it.

"Emperor of ancient Mu," she said, her tones soft and cooing, like a dove's: "Listen to me. I am Kay Lin, one of the surface people who live and love and die far above your head. I have come to you for help, and to give you a piece of information of great import to you."

The giant figure on the throne stirred and looked about, then its great mechanical eyes looked upward, peering through the metal of the building's roof, up through the water with x-ray vision, and into the little flyer in which the four Mekkans sat. But he did not speak. It was obvious that for the moment he listened.

"From a far planet one of your own members, who escaped thousands of years ago from the holocaust that you yourself escaped in

another way, by preparing a city that could live on the bottom of the ocean, has returned to Earth, and is at this moment waging a war of extermination on the surface people. It is in his mind to take back the planet of his birth, and to rule it as the sole emperor, for he does not know that you survive, and your companions with you. His mind is poisoned by his contact with the rays of outer space, and he is no longer sane. When he learns of you, as he will, he will make war on you. He is a great danger to you, if he is allowed to consolidate his position here on Earth. Look for yourself, and see that I speak the truth!"

And now, Kay Lin's rays reached out across the surface of Earth, and brought the smoking ruin of Mekka onto her mirror, and there in the midst of it, the other-world Metal Emperor.

DOWN below, the gigantic metal man rose to his feet, staring upward at the scene. Then, like the rumble of Earth's largest volcano itself, his voice came to them.

"I have seen, beautiful woman of the surface. And I will help you. I come now. Await me."

The shining surface of Kay Lin's mirror became dark, and nothing she could do could bring

back the picture of the metal city on the ocean floor far below.

"We shall never see it again!" said Kay Lin with conviction. "The true Metal Emperor knows now, and he will maintain his impregnability against interference. It must be a great mind that he has, indeed, to live for eternity in those dark depths, meditating on things beyond mere fleshly scope."

"I believe you are right," said Spear, almost reverently. "We are fortunate above all surface people, to have seen what we have seen."

"Let us watch the sea outside the port," said Kay Lin. "It should not be long before the Metal Emperor emerges."

They crowded to the side ports and stared out, over the glistening ocean that extended to infinity. For long moments it remained an unbroken surface, and then a white line of surf appeared far out, as though a reef was there, but there had been no reef previously. It approached now, nearer to shore and a dark object began rising out of it. It advanced swiftly, ever rising, and what were obviously half-mile strides, and soon the whole head loomed up above the water, then tremendous shoulders, gigantic torso, and at last the stunning reality of towering columnar legs. The Metal Emperor loomed into the sky, fully a mile tall, and

at last stood in the shallow water a thousand feet away from the island. As they watched in awe a huge hand reached out, grasped their ship gently in tremendous metal fingers, and lifted them aloft. Then, with a stride as gentle as waves, with a lofting, lilting motion, the Metal Emperor began wading, following the shallows, so that always, he was able to hold the flyer above water, even though at times his head was submerged.

The wind whistled about the flyer, and Spear marveled. "We could not have flown this fast!"

"We shall be in Mekka before we know it!" said Jill.

IN less than four hours the shoreline of ancient America appeared. And a few minutes later, the gigantic pall of smoke that was the erupting Vulcana became visible. Here the Metal Emperor set the tiny flyer free, by opening his palm and allowing Kay Lin to lift the ship off as from a landing field. Then he strode on, purposefully and grimly. Kay Lin followed as fast as she could in the flyer.

They were yet far away when the two metal giants met. But Kay Lin picked up the scene on her television mirror, and the battle that followed kept them all silent

in awe, stunned beyond speaking by the enormity of it. It seemed unbelievable, yet it was happening before them.

From the beginning it was obvious that the giant from the depths of sunken Mu was far superior in strength and mental ability, and as the duel went on, the Metal Emperor led it skillfully from the city, into the depths of the forest, and there he proceeded to batter the invading emperor of the Rif into a shapeless pile of metal. Yet he carefully avoided damage to the head, and finally, when he wrested it from the body, he set it down carefully in the forest, and turned back to the city.

Now his huge voice came to them in the ship. "What is the matter with the volcano?"

"It has been sabotaged with radioactive materials, so that it is a gigantic fissioning pile. It will have to be damped."

The giant turned now to the volcano, and he seemed intent on it, staring at it with his great lenses. Finally he seemed to nod a bit, and he strode off into the distance. "Where is he going?" asked Jill.

"He has some plan in mind," answered Jac. "I believe in some way he has analyzed what is necessary to damp the Vulcana, and is off to find the material."

Kay Lin followed the Metal Emperor with her rays, and on the mirror, they saw him stoop finally and wrest the top off a stony outcropping, one of a group of small mountains in the Appalachian chain. Then he came striding back.

AT length he stood almost astride the Vulcana, its flames and smoke billowing between his legs, and its lava flowing past his feet. Then he lifted the huge boulder on high and with tremendous force, jammed it down into the crater. It disappeared in the depths, and almost instantly the crimson glow that lighted the smoky sky began to dim. The brilliant white fire glowing from the now choked openings of the tunnels of Mekka to a dull red, then a gray, and finally turned black. The atomic fire was going out.

Then, as the four watched, struck dumb with awe, the Metal Emperor strode back to the forest, and almost tenderly picked up the head of the Rifian Emperor. For a moment he held it up, looking into its eye pieces, then he tucked it under his arm and began striding toward the sea.

"He's going back to his under-ocean city," said Kay Lin. "We must thank him!"

She turned to her apparatus and pressed several switches, then she

spoke into the microphone. "Thank you, Emperor of Mu. We shall never forget you!"

The answer came, rumbling through the sky like the thunder of the gods. "I hear, beautiful one. And if ever you need me again, you need but call. It will be my pleasure."

And then, as they watched, the giant figure waded out into the water, ever deeper, until finally nothing remained but a tremendous wave that washed away and was gone.

Spear turned to Jill Lang. "You haven't got a chance in the world with Jac Azad," he said. "Even the Metal Emperor has fallen for her like a ton of bricks. So, if you don't mind, how about concentrating on something you can get?"

Jill looked at Kay Lin, then turned to Spear. "What makes you think I ever wanted our pretty boy? I'll take a man with muscles any time. It wouldn't be right for a man to have a wife who can beat him at anything, even if it's only lion taming."

Spear grinned. "Okay, Jill. But I'm warning you, I don't tame as easy as Jac, there. But if you want to know, I'd rather have my girl use her natural weapons without benefit of machine. Sort of gives a guy a fighting chance."

Jac Azad looked at them both,

and flushed to the roots of his hair. But Kay Lin only laughed. She turned off the ray machine.

"Come here, soldier," she said in a cooing contralto.

"Do I look like a fool?" said Jac. And he came.

* * *

MEKKA was gone, but Jac and Kay Lin stood now on the hills of black lava that marked its ancient site, into the white dome over the many openings that marked the new Mekka abuilding deep under the surface.

"She will be more beautiful and greater than ever," said Jac.

"Yes, my emperor," murmured

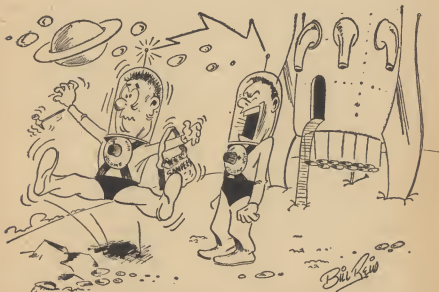
Kay Lin, "and I am very glad that you are not made of metal."

Jac looked down at her. "So am I! For if I were, I would be afraid of melting!"

He took her in his arms, and for a long moment there was silence. Then she gasped and pulled away. "My," she cried. "The Vulcana must be erupting again!"

Jac grinned down at her. "That's one thing we need never worry about," he said. "That old cone is as dead as any volcano will ever be."

"And you know," she said, "I don't much care—as long as you are about"



"I said let's go back to the ship—I'M HUNGRY!"

Psi-Man Heal My Child!

by

Philip K. Dick

Survivors of Earth's final war lived in underground communes, fearful of venturing into the outside world; but there were a few outside who wanted to help rebuild the mess man had made of himself. These few were mutants — and shunned!

HE was a lean man, middle-aged, with grease-stained hair and skin, a crumpled cigarette between his teeth, his left hand clamped around the wheel of his car. The car, an ex-commercial surface truck, rumbled noisily but smoothly as it ascended the outgoing ramp and approached the check-gate that terminated the commune area.

"Slow down," his wife said. "There's the guard sitting on that pile of crates."

Ed Garby rode the brake; the car settled grimly into a long glide that ended directly in front of the guard. In the back seat of the car the twins fretted restlessly, already bothered by the gummy heat oozing through the top and windows of the car. Down his wife's smooth neck great drops of perspiration slid. In her arms the

baby twisted and struggled feebly.

"How's she?" Ed muttered to his wife, indicating the wad of gray, sickly flesh that poked from the soiled blanket. "Hot — like me."

The guard came strolling over indifferently, sleeves rolled up, rifle slung over his shoulder. "What say mac?" Resting his big hands in the open window, he gazed dully into the interior of the car, observing the man and wife, the children, the dilapidated upholstery. "Going outside awhile? Let's see your pass."

Ed got out the crumpled pass and handed it over. "I got a sick child."

The guard examined the pass and returned it "Better take her down to sixth level. You got a right to use the infirmary; you live in this dump like the rest of us."



"No," Ed said. "I'm taking no child of mine down to that butchery."

The guard shook his head in disagreement. "They got good equipment, mac. High-powered stuff left over from the war. Take her down there and they'll fix her up." He waved toward the desolate expanse of dry trees and hills that lay beyond the check-gate. "What do you think you'll find out there? You going to dump her somewhere? Toss her in a creek? Down a well? It's none of my business, but I wouldn't take a dog out there, let alone a sick child."

Ed started up the motor. "I'm getting help out there. Take a child down to sixth and they make her a laboratory animal. They experiment, cut her up, throw her away and say they couldn't save her. They got used to doing that in the war; they never stopped."

"Suit yourself," the guard said, moving away from the car. "Myself, I'd sooner trust military doctors with equipment than some crazy old quack living out in the ruins. Some savage heathen tie a bag of stinking dung around her neck, mumble nonsense and wave and dance around." He shouted furiously after the car: "Damn fools — going back to barbarism, when you got doctors and x-rays and serums down on sixth! Why

the hell do you want to go out in the ruins when you've got a civilization here?"

He wandered glumly back to his crates. And added, "What there is left of it."

ARID land, as dry and parched as dead skin, lay on both sides of the rutted tracks that made up the road. A harsh rattle of noon-day wind shook the gaunt trees jutting here and there from the cracked, baking soil. An occasional drab bird fluttered in the thick underbrush, heavy-set gray shapes that scratched peevishly in search of grubs.

Behind the car the white concrete walls of the commune faded and were lost in the distance. Ed Garby watched them go apprehensively; his hands convulsively jerked as a twist in the road cut off the radar towers posted on the hills overlooking the commune.

"Damn it," he muttered thickly, "maybe he was right; maybe we're making a mistake." Doubts shivered through his mind. The trip was dangerous; even heavily-armed scavenger parties were attacked by predatory animals and by the wild bands of quasi-humans living in the abandoned ruins littered across the planet. All he had to protect himself and his family was his hand-

operated cutting tool. He knew how to use it, of course; didn't he grind it into a moving belt of reclaimed wreckage ten hours a day every day of the week? But if the motor of the car failed . . .

"Stop worrying," Barbara said quietly. "I've been along here before, and there's nothing ever gone wrong."

He felt shame and guilt: his wife had crept outside the commune many times, along with other women and wives, and with some of the men, too. A good part of the proletariat left the commune, with and without passes . . . anything to break the monotony of work and educational lectures. But his fear returned. It wasn't the physical menace that bothered him, or even unfamiliar separation from the vast submerged tank of steel and concrete in which he had been born and in which he had grown up, spent his life, worked and married. It was the realization that the guard had been right, that he was sinking into ignorance and superstition, that made his skin turn cold and clammy, in spite of the baking mid-summer heat.

"Women always lead it," he said aloud. "Men built machines, organized science, cities. Women have their potions and brews. I guess we're seeing the end of rea-

son. We're seeing the last remnants of rational society."

"What's a city?" one of the twins asked.

"You're seeing one now," Ed answered. He pointed beyond the road. "Take a good look."

The trees had ended. The baked surface of brown earth had faded to a dull metallic glint. An uneven plain stretched out, bleak and dismal, a pocked surface of jagged heaps and pits. Dark weeds grew here and there. An occasional wall remained standing; at one point a bathtub lay on its side like a dead, toothless mouth, deprived of face and head.

The region had been picked over countless times. Everything of value had been loaded up and trucked to the various communes in the area. Along the road were neat heaps of bones, collected but never utilized. Use had been found for cement rubble, iron scrap, wiring, plastic tubing, paper and cloth — but not for bones.

"You mean people lived *there*?" the twins protested simultaneously. Disbelief and horror showed on their faces. "It's — awful."

The road divided. Ed slowed the car down and waited for his wife to direct him. "Is it far?" he demanded hoarsely. "This place gives me the creeps. You can't tell

what's hanging around in those cellars. We gassed them back in '09, but it's probably worn off by now."

"To the right," Barbara said. "Beyond that hill, there."

ED shifted into low-low and edged the car past a ditch, onto a side road. "You really think this old woman has the power?" he asked helplessly. "I hear so damn much stuff — I never know what's true and what's hogwash. There's always supposed to be some old hag that can raise the dead and read the future and cure the sick. People've been reporting that stuff for five thousand years."

"And for five thousand years such things have been happening." His wife's voice was placid, confident. "They're always there to help us. All we have to do is go to them. I saw her heal Mary Fulsome's son; remember, he had that withered leg and couldn't walk. The medics wanted to destroy him."

"According to Mary Fulsome," Ed muttered harshly.

The car nosed its way between dead branches of ancient trees. The ruins fell behind; abruptly the road plunged into a gloomy thicket of vines and shrubs that shut out the sunlight. Ed blinked, then

snapped on the dim headlights. They flickered on as the car ground its way up a rutted hill, around a narrow curve . . . and then the road ceased.

They had reached their destination. Four rusty cars blocked the road; others were parked on the shoulders and among the twisted trees. Beyond the cars stood a group of silent people, men and their families, in the drab uniforms of commune workers. Ed pulled on the brake and fumbled for the ignition key; he was astounded at the variety of communes represented. All the nearby communes, and distant ones he had never encountered. Some of the waiting people had come hundreds of miles.

"There's always people waiting," Barbara said. She kicked open the bent door and carefully slid out, the baby in her arms. "People come here for all kinds of help, whenever they're in need."

Beyond the crowd was a crude wooden building, shabby and dilapidated, a patched-together shelter of the war years. A gradual line of waiting persons was being conducted up the rickety steps and into the buildings; for the first time Ed caught sight of those whom he had come to consult.

"Is that the old woman?" he demanded, as a thin, withered

shape appeared briefly at the top of the steps, glanced over the waiting people, and selected one. She conferred with a plump man, and then a muscular giant joined the discussion. "My God," Ed said, "is there an *organization* of them?"

"Different ones do different things," Barbara answered. Clutching the baby tight, she edged her way forward into the waiting mass of people. "We want to see the healer — we'll have to stand with that group over to the right, waiting by that tree."

PORTER sat in the kitchen of the shelter, smoking and drinking coffee, his feet up on the window sill, vaguely watching the shuffling line of people moving through the front door and into the various rooms.

"A lot of them, today," he said to Jack. "What we need is a flat cover-charge."

Jack grunted angrily and shook back his mane of blond hair. "Why aren't you out helping instead of sitting here guzzling coffee?"

"Nobody wants to peep into the future." Porter belched noisily; he was plump and flabby, blue-eyed, with thin damp hair. "When somebody wants to know if they're going to strike it rich or marry a beautiful woman I'll be there in

my booth to advise them."

"Fortune-telling," Jack muttered. He stood restlessly by the window, great arms folded, face stern with worry. "That's what we're down to."

"I can't help that they ask me. One old geezer asked me when he was going to die; when I told him thirty-one days he turned red as a beet and started screaming at me. One thing, I'm honest. I tell them the truth, not what they want to hear." Porter grinned. "I'm not a quack."

"How long has it been since somebody asked you something important?"

"You mean something of abstract significance?" Porter lazily searched his mind. "Last week a fellow asked me if there'd ever be interplanetary ships again. I told him not that I could see."

"Did you also tell him you can't see worth a damn? A half year at the most?"

Porter's toad-like face bloomed contentedly. "He didn't ask me that."

The thin, withered old woman entered the kitchen briefly. "Lord," Thelma gasped, sinking down in a chair and pouring herself coffee. "I'm exhausted. And there must be fifty of them out there waiting to get healed. She examined her

shaking hands. "Two bone cancers in one day about finishes me. I think the baby will survive, but the other's too far gone even for me. The baby will have to come back." Her voice trailed off wearily. "Back again next week."

"It'll be slower tomorrow," Porter predicted. "Ash storm down from Canada will keep most of them at their communes. Of course, after that —" He broke off and eyed Jack curiously. "What are you upset about? Everybody's growling around, today."

"I just came from Butterford," Jack answered moodily. "I'm going back later and try again."

Thelma shuddered. Porter looked away uneasily; he disliked hearing about conversations with a man whose bones were piled in the basement of the shelter. An almost superstitious fear drifted through the plump body of the precog. It was one thing to preview the future; seeing ahead was a positive, progressive talent. But returning to the past, to men already dead, to cities now turned to ash and rubble, places erased from the maps, participating in events long since forgotten — it was a sickly, neurotic rehashing of what had already been. Picking and stirring among the bones — literally bones—of the past.

"What did he say?" Thelma asked.

"The same as always," Jack answered.

"How many times is this?"

Jack's lips twisted. "Eleven times. And he knows it — I told him."

Thelma moved from the kitchen, out into the hall. "Back to work." She lingered at the door. "Eleven times and always the same. I've been making computations. How old are you, Jack?"

"How old do I look?"

"About thirty. You were born in 1946. This is 2017. That makes you seventy-one years old. I'd say I'm talking to an entity about a third of the way along. Where's your current entity?"

"You should be able to figure that. Back in '76."

"Doing what?"

Jack didn't answer. He knew perfectly well what his entity of this date 2017, was doing back in the past. The old man of seventy-one years was lying in a medical hospital at one of the military centers, receiving treatment for a gradually worsening nephritis. He shot a quick glance at Porter to see if the precog was going to volunteer information previewed from the future. There was no expression on Porter's languid features, but that

proved nothing. He'd have to get Stephen to probe into Porter if he really wanted to be sure.

Like the common workers who filed in daily to learn if they were going to strike it rich and marry happily, he wanted vitally to know the date of his own death. He *had* to know — it went beyond mere wanting.

He faced Porter squarely. "Let's have it. What do you see about me in the next six months?"

Porter yawned. "Am I supposed to orate the whole works? It'll take hours."

Jack relaxed, weak with relief. Then he would survive another six months, at least. In that he could bring to a successful completion his discussions with General Ernest Butterford, chief of staff of the armed forces of the United States. He pushed past Thelma and out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"Back to see Butterford again. I'm going to make one more try."

"You always say that," Thelma complained peevishly.

"And I always am," Jack said. *Until I'm dead*, he thought bitterly, resentfully. Until the half-conscious old man lying in the hospital bed at Baltimore, Maryland, passes away or is destroyed to make

room for some wounded private carted by boxcar from the front lines, charged* by Soviet nepalm, crippled by nerve gas, insane from metallic ash-particles. When the ancient corpse was thrown out — and it wouldn't be long—there would be no more discussion with General Butterford.

FIRST, he descended the stairs to the supply lockers in the basement of the shelter. Doris lay asleep on her bed in the corner, dark hair like cobwebs over her coffee-colored features, one bare arm raised, a heap of clothing strewn on the chair beside the bed. She awoke sleepily, stirred, and half sat up.

"What time is it?"

Jack glanced at his wristwatch. "One-thirty in the afternoon." He began opening one of the intricate locks that sealed in their supplies. Presently he slid a metal case down a rail and onto the cement floor. He swung an overhead light around and clicked it on.

The girl watched with interest. "What are you doing?" She tossed her covers back and got to her feet, stretched, and padded bare-foot over to him. "I could have brought it out for you without all that work."

From the lead-lined case Jack re-

moved the carefully stacked heap of bones and remnants of personal possessions: wallet, identification papers, photographs, fountain pen, bits of tattered uniform, a gold wedding ring, some silver coins. "He died under difficulties," Jack murmured. He examined the data-tape, made sure it was complete, and then slammed shut the case. "I told him I would bring this. Of course, he won't remember."

"Each time erases the last?" Doris wandered over to get her clothes. "It's really the same time again and again, isn't it?"

"The same interval," Jack admitted, "but there's no repetition of material."

Doris eyed him slyly as she struggled into her jeans. "Some repetition . . . it always comes out the same, no matter what you do. Butterford goes ahead and presents his recommendations to the President."

Jack didn't hear her. He had already moved back, taken his series of steps along the time-path. The basement, Doris' half-dressed figure, wavered and receded, as if seen through the bottom of a glass gradually filled with opaque liquid. Darkness, mixed with shifting textures of density, wavered around him as he walked sternly forward, the metal case gripped. *Backward,*

actually. He was retreating along the direction in which the flow itself moved. Changing places with an earlier John Tremaine, the pimple-faced boy of sixteen who had trudged dutifully to high school, in the year 1962 A. D. in the city of Chicago, Illinois. This was a switch he had made many times. His younger entity should be resigned, by now . . . but he hoped idly that Doris would be finished dressing when the boy emerged.

The darkness that was no-time dwindled, and he blinked in a sudden torrent of yellow sunlight. Still gripping his metal case he made the final step backward and found himself in the center of a vast murmuring room. People drifted on all sides; several gaped at him, paralyzed with astonishment. For a moment he couldn't place the spatial location — and then memory came, a swift bitter flood of nostalgia.

He was back in the high school library where he had spent much time. The familiar place of books and bright-faced youths, gaily-dressed girls giggling and studying and flirting . . . young people totally oblivious of the approaching war. The mass death that would leave nothing of this city but dead, drifting ash.

HE hurried from the library, conscious of the circle of bewilderment he had left behind. It was awkward to make a switch in which the passive entity was near other people; the abrupt transformation of a sixteen-year-old high school boy into the stern, towering figure of a thirty-year-old man was difficult to assimilate, even in a society theoretically aware of Psionic powers.

Theoretically — because at this date public consciousness was minimal. Awe and disbelief were the primary emotions; the surge of hopefulness hadn't begun. Psi-powers seemed miraculous only; the realization that these powers were at the disposal of the public wouldn't set in for a number of years.

He emerged on the busy Chicago street and hailed a taxi. The roar of busses, autos, the metallic swirl of buildings and people and signs, dazed him. Activity on all sides: the ordinary harmless routines of the common citizen, remote from the lethal planning at top levels. The people on all sides of him were about to be traded for the chimera of international prestige . . . human life for metaphysical phantoms. He gave the cab driver the address of Butterford's hotel suite and settled back to prepare himself

for the familiar encounter.

The first steps were routine. He gave his identification to the battery of armed guards, was checked, searched, and processed into the suite. For fifteen minutes he sat in a luxurious anteroom smoking and restlessly waiting — as always. There were no alterations he could make here: the changes, if they were to materialize, came later.

"Do you know who I am?" he began bluntly, when the tiny, suspicious head of General Butterford was stuck from an inner office. He advanced grimly, case gripped. "This is the twelfth visit; there had better be results, this time."

Butterford's deep-set little eyes danced hostilely behind his thick glasses. "You're one of those supermen," he squeaked. "Those Psionics." He blocked the door with his wizened, uniformed body. "Well? What do you want? My time's valuable."

Jack seated himself facing the general's desk and corps of aides. "You have the analysis of my talent and history in your hands. You know what I can do."

Butterford glanced hostilely at the report. "You move into time. So?" His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, *twelfth* time?" He grabbed up a heap of memoranda.

"I've never seen you before. State what you have to say and then get out; I'm busy."

"I have a present for you," Jack said grimly. He carried the metal case to the desk, unsnapped it, and exposed the contents. "They belong to you — go ahead, take them out and run your hands over them."

Butterford gazed with revulsion at the bones. "What is this, some sort of anti-war exhibit? Are you Psi's mixed up with those Jehovah's Witnesses?" His voice rose shrilly resentfully. "Is this something you expect to pressure me with?"

"These are your goddamn bones!" Jack shouted in the man's face. He overturned the case; the contents spilled out on the desk and floor. "*Touch them!* You're going to die in this war, like everybody else. You're going to suffer and die hideously — they're going to get you with bacterial poisons one year and six days from this date. You'll live long enough to see the total destruction of organized society and then you'll go the way of everybody else!"

IT would have been easier if Butterford were a coward. He sat gazing down at the tattered remains, the coins and pictures and

rusting possessions, his face white, body stiff as metal. "I don't know whether to believe you," he said finally. "I never really believed any of this Psi-stuff."

"That's totally untrue," Jack answered hotly. "There isn't a government on the planet ignorant of us. You and the Soviet Union have been trying to organize us since '58, when we made ourselves known."

The discussion was on ground that Butterford understood. His eyes blazed furiously. "That's the whole point! If you Psi's cooperated there wouldn't be those bones." He jabbed wildly at the pale heap on the desk. "You come here and blame me for the war. Blame yourselves — you won't put your shoulders to the wheel. How can we hope to come out of this war unless everybody does his part?" He leaned meaningfully toward Jack. "You came from the future, you say. Tell me what you Psi's are going to do in the war. Tell me the part you're going to play."

"No part."

Butterford settled back triumphantly. "You're going to stand idly by?"

"Absolutely."

"And you came here to blame me?"

"If we help, Jack said care-

fully, "we help at policy level, not as hired servants. Otherwise, we will stand on the sidelines, waiting. We're available, but if winning the war depends on us, we want to say how that war will be won. Or whether there'll be a war at all." He slammed the metal case shut. "Otherwise, we might become apprehensive, as the scientists did in the middle fifties. We might begin to lose *our* enthusiasm . . . and also become bad security risks."

In Jack's mind a voice spoke, thin and bitter. A telepathic member of the Guild, a Psi of the present, monitoring the discussion from the New York office. "Very well-spoken. But you've lost. You lack the ability to maneuver him . . . all you've done is defend our position. You haven't even brought up the possibility of changing his."

It was true. Desperately, Jack said: "I didn't come back here to state the Guild's position — you know our position! I came to lay the facts out in front of you. I came here from 2017. The war is over. Only a remnant survives. These are the facts, events that have taken place. You're going to recommend to the President that the United States call Russia's bluff on Java." His words came out individually, icily. "It's not a bluff. It means total war. Your re-

commendation is in error."

Butterford bristled. "You want us to back down? Let them take over the free world?"

Twelve times: impasse. He had accomplished nothing. "You'd go into the war knowing you can't win?"

"We'll fight," Butterford said. "Better an honorable war than a dishonorable peace."

"No war is honorable. War means death, barbarism, and mass destruction."

"What does peace mean?"

"Peace means the growth of the Guild. In fifty years our presence will shift the ideology of both blocs. We're above the war; we straddle both worlds. There're Psi's here and in Russia; we're part of no country. The scientists could have been that, once. But they chose to cooperate with national governments. Now it's up to us."

Butterford shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "You're not going to influence us. *We* make policy . . . if you act, you act in line with our directives. Or you don't act. You stay out."

"We'll stay out."

Butterford leaped up "*Traitors!*" he shouted as Jack left the office. "You don't have a choice! We demand your abilities! We'll hunt

you out and grab you one by one. You've got to cooperate — everybody's got to cooperate. This is total war!"

The door closed, and he was in the anteroom.

"No, there isn't any hope," the voice in his mind stated bleakly. "I can prove that you've done this twelve times. And you're contemplating a thirteenth. Give up. The withdrawal order has been given out already. When the war begins we'll be aloof."

"We ought to help!" Jack said futilely. "Not the war — we ought to help *them*, the people who're going to be killed by the millions."

"We can't. We're not gods. We're only humans with paratalents. We can help, if they accept us, allow us to help. We can't force our views on them. We can't force the Guild in, if the governments don't want us."

Gripping the metal case, Jack headed numbly down the stairs, toward the street. Back to the high school library.

AT the dinner table, with black night lying outside the shelter, he faced the other surviving Guild members. "So here we are. Outside society — doing nothing. Not harming and not helping.

Useless!" He smashed his fist convulsively against the rotting wooden wall. "Peripheral and useless, and while we sit here the communes fall apart and what's left collapses."

Thelma spooned up her soup impassively. "We heal the sick, read the future, offer advice, and perform miracles."

"We've been doing that thousands of years," Jack answered bitterly. "Sibyls, witches, perched on deserted hills outside towns. *Can't we get in and help?* Do we always have to be on the outside, we who understand what's going on? Watching the blind fools lead mankind to destruction! Couldn't we have stopped the war, forced peace on them?"

Porter said languidly, "We don't want to force anything on them, Jack. You know that. We're not their masters. We want to help them, not control them."

The meal continued in gloomy silence. Doris said presently. "The trouble is with the governments. It's the politicians who're jealous of us." She smiled mournfully across the table at Jack. "They know if we had our way, a time would come when politicians wouldn't be needed."

Thelma attacked her plate of dried beans and broiled rabbit in

a thin paste of gravy. "There isn't much of a government, these days. It isn't like it was before the war. You can't really call a few majors sitting around in commune office a *government*."

"They make the decisions," Porter pointed out. "They decided what commune policy will be."

"I know of a commune up North," Stephen said, "in which the workers killed the officers and took over. They're dying out. It won't be long before they're extinct."

Jack pushed his plate away and got to his feet. "I'm going out on the porch." He left the kitchen, crossed through the deserted living room and opened the steel-reinforced front door. Cold evening wind swirled around him as he blindly felt his way to the railing and stopped, hands in his pockets, gazing sightlessly out at the vacant field.

The rusty fleet of cars was gone. Nothing stirred except the withered trees along the road, dry rustles in the restless night wind. A dismal sight; overhead a few stars glowed fitfully. Far off somewhere an animal crashed after its prey, a wild dog or perhaps a quasi-human living down in the ruined cellars of Chicago.

After a time Doris appeared be-

hind him. Silently, she came up and stood next to him, a slim dark shape in the night gloom, her arms folded against the cold. "You're not going to try again?" she asked softly.

"Twelve is enough. I — can't change him. I don't have the ability. I'm not adroit enough." Jack spread his massive hands miserably. "He's a clever little chicken of a thing. Like Thelma — scrawny and full of talk. Again and again I get back there — and what can I do?"

Doris touched his arm wistfully. "How does it look? I never saw cities full of life, before the war. Remember, I was born in a military camp."

"You'd like it. People laughing and hurrying. Cars, signs, life everywhere. It drives me crazy. I wish I couldn't see it — to be able to step from here to there." He indicated the twisted trees. "Ten steps back from those trees, and there it is. And yet it's gone forever . . . even for me. There'll be a time when I can't step there either, like the rest of you."

DORIS failed to understand him. "Isn't it strange?" she murmured. "I can move anything in the world, but I can't move myself back, the way you do." She

made a slight flutter of her hands; in the darkness something slapped against the rail of the porch and she bent over to retrieve it. "See the pretty bird? Stunned, not dead." She tossed the bird up and it managed to struggle off into the shrubs. "I've got so I only stun them."

Jack wasn't pleased. "That's what we do with our talents. Tricks, games. Nothing more."

"That isn't so!" Doris objected. "Today when I got up, there was a bunch of doubters. Stephen caught their thoughts and sent me out." Pride tingled in her voice. "I brought an underground spring up to the surface — it burst out everywhere and got them all soaked, before I sent it back. They were convinced."

"Did it ever occur to you," Jack said, "that you could make it possible for them to rebuild their cities?"

"They don't want to rebuild cities."

"They don't think they can. They've given up the idea of rebuilding. It's a lost concept." He brooded unhappily. "There's too many millions of miles of ruined ash, and too few people. They don't even try to unify the communes."

"They have radios," Doris pointed out. "They can talk to each

other, if they want."

"If they use them, the war will start up again. They know there're pockets of fanatics left who'd be happy to start the war, given half the chance. They'd rather sink into barbarism than get that started." He spat into the weedy bushes growing beneath the porch. "I don't blame them."

"If we controlled the communes," Doris said thoughtfully, "We wouldn't start up the war. We'd unify them on a peaceful basis."

"You're playing all sides at once," Jack said angrily. "A minute ago you were performing miracles — where'd this thought come from?"

Doris hesitated. "Well, I was just passing it on. I guess Stephen really said it, or thought it. I just spoke it out loud."

"You enjoy being a mouthpiece for Stephen?"

Doris fluttered fearfully. "My God, Jack — he can probe you. Don't say things like that!"

Jack stepped away from her and down the porch steps. He rapidly crossed the dark, silent field, away from the shelter. The girl hurried after him.

"Don't walk off," she gasped breathlessly. "Stephen's just a kid. He's not like you, grown up and big. Mature."

Jack laughed upward at the black sky. "You damn fool. Do you know how old I am?"

"No," Doris said, "and don't say. I know you're older than I am. You've always been around; I remember you when I was just a kid. You were always big and strong and blond." She giggled nervously. "Of course, all those *others* . . . those different persons, old and young. I don't really understand, but they're all you, I guess. Different you's along your time-path."

"That's right," Jack said tightly. "They're all me."

"That one today, when you switched down in the basement, when I was sleeping." Doris caught his arm and tucked her cold fingers around his wrist. "Just a kid, with books under his arm, in a green sweater and brown slacks."

"Sixteen years old," Jack muttered.

"He was cute. Shy, flustered. Younger than I am. We went upstairs and he watched the crowd; that was when Stephen called me to do the miracle. He — I mean, *you* — stood around so interested. Porter kidded him. Porter doesn't mean any harm — he likes to eat and sleep and that's about all. He's all right. Stephen kidded him, too. I don't think Stephen liked him."

"You mean he doesn't ilke me."

"I — guess you know how we feel. All of us, to some degree . . . we wonder why you keep going back again and again, trying to patch up the past. The past is over! Maybe not to you . . . but it really is over. You can't change it; the war came, this is all ruined, only remnants are left. You said it yourself: *why are we on the outside?* We could so easily be on the inside." Childish excitement thrilled through her; she pushed against him eagerly, carried away by her flow of words. "Forget the past — let's work with the present! The material is here; the people, the objects. Let's move it all around. Pick it up, set it down." She lifted a grove of trees a mile away; the whole top of a line of hills burst loose, rose high in the air, and then dissolved in booming fragments. "We can take things apart and put them back together!"

"I'm seventy-one years old," Jack said. "There isn't going to be any putting together for me. And I'm through picking over the past. I'm not going to try any more. You can all rejoice . . . I'm finished."

SHE tugged at him fiercely. "Then it's up to the rest of us!"

If he had Porter's talent he

could see beyond his death. Porter would, at some future time, view his own corpse stretched out, view his burial, continue to live month after month, while his plump corpse rotted underground. Porter's bovine contentedness was possible in a man who could preview the future . . . Jack twisted wretchedly as anguished uncertainty ached through him. After the dying old man in the military hospital reached the inevitable end of his lifespan — what then? What happened *here*, among the survivors of the Guild?

Beside him, the girl babbled on. The possibilities he had suggested: real material to work with, not tricks or miracles. For her, the possibilities of social action were swimming into existence. They were all restless, except perhaps Porter. Tired of standing idle. Impatient with the anachronistic officers who kept the communes alive, misguided remnants of a past order of incompetents who had proved their unfitness to rule by leading their block to almost total destruction.

Rule by the Guild couldn't be worse.

Or could it? Something had survived rule by power-oriented politicians, professional spellbinders recruited from smoke-dingy city

halls and cheap law offices. If Psionic rule failed, if analogues of the struggle of national states arose, there might be nothing spared. The collective power of the Guild reached into all dimensions of life; for the first time a genuine totalitarian society could arise. Dominated by telepaths, precogs, healers with the power to animate inorganic matter and to wither, organic matter, what ordinary person could survive?

There would be no recourse against the Guild. Man controlled by Psionic organizers would be powerless. It was merely a question of time before the maintenance of non-Psi's would be seriously scrutinized, with an eye toward greater efficiency, toward the elimination of useless material. Rule by super-competents could be worse than rule by incompetents.

"Worse for whom?" Stephen's clear, treble thoughts came into his mind. Cold, confident, utterly without doubt. "You can see they're dying out. It's not a question of our eliminating them; it's a question of *how long are we going to maintain their artificial preservation?* We're running a zoo, Jack. We're keeping alive an extinct species. And the cage is too large . . . it takes up all the world. Give them some space, if you want. A

subcontinent. But we deserve the balance for our own use."

PORTER sat scooping up baked rice pudding from his dish. He continued eating even after Stephen began screaming. It wasn't until Thelma clawed his hand loose from his spoon that he gave up and turned his attention to what was happening.

Surprise was totally unknown to him; six months earlier he had examined the scene, reflected on it, and turned his attention to later events. Reluctantly, he pushed back his chair and dragged his heavy body upright.

"He's going to kill me!" Stephen was wailing. "Why didn't you tell me?" he shouted at Porter. "You knew — he's coming to kill me right now."

"For God's sake," Thelma shrilled in Porter's ear, "is it true? Can't you do something? You're a man — stop him!"

While Porter gathered a reply, Jack entered the kitchen. Stephen's shrill wails grew frantic. Doris hurried wild-eyed after Jack, her talent forgotten in the abrupt explosion of excitement. Thelma hurried around the table, between Jack and the boy, scrawny arms cut, dried-up face contorted with outrage.

"I can see it!" Stephen screamed. "In his mind — he's going to kill me because he knows I want to —" He broke off. "He doesn't want us to do anything. He wants us to stay here in this old ruin, doing tricks for people." Fury broke through his terror. "I'm not going to do it. I'm through doing mind-reading tricks. Now he's thinking about killing all of us! He wants us all dead!"

Porter settled down in his chair and pawed for his spoon. He pulled his plate under his chin; eyes intently on Jack and Stephen, he continued slowly eating.

"I'm sorry," Jack said. "You shouldn't have told me your thoughts, I couldn't have read them. You could have kept them to yourself." He moved forward.

Thelma grabbed him with her skinny claws and hung on tight. The wail and babble rose in hysteria; Porter winced and bobbed his thick neck-wattles. Impassively, he watched Jack and the old woman struggle together; beyond them, Stephen stood paralyzed with childish terror, face waxen, youthful body rigid.

Doris moved forward, and Porter stopped eating. A kind of tension settled over him; but it was a finality that made him forget eating, not doubt or uncertainty.

Knowing what was going to happen didn't diminish the awesomeness of it. He couldn't be surprised . . . but he could be sobered.

"Leave him alone," Doris gasped. "He's just a boy. Go sit down and behave yourself." She caught hold of Jack around the waist; the two women swayed back and forth, trying to hold the immense muscular figure. "Stop it! Leave him alone!"

Jack broke away. He tottered, tried to regain his balance. The two women fluttered and clawed after him like furious birds; he reached back to push them away

....

"Don't look," Porter said sharply.

Doris turned in his direction. And didn't see, as he anticipated. Thelma saw, and her voice suddenly died into silence. Stephen choked off, horrified, then screeched in stricken dismay.

They had seen the last entity along Jack's time-path once before. Briefly one night the withered old man had appeared, as the more youthful entity inspected the military hospital to analyze its resources. The younger Jack had returned at once, satisfied that the dying old man would be given the best treatment available. In that moment they had seen his gaunt, fever-ridden face. This time the

eyes weren't bright. Lusterless, the eyes of a dead object gazed blankly at them, as the hunched figure remained briefly upright.

THELMA tried vainly to catch it as it pitched forward. Like a sack of meal it crashed into the table, scattering cups and silver. It wore a faded blue robe, knotted at the waist. Its pale-white feet were bare. From it oozed the pungent hygienic scent of the hospital, of age and illness and death.

"You did it," Porter said. "Both of you together. Doris, especially. But it would have come in the next few days, anyhow." He added, "Jack's dead. We'll have to bury him, unless you think any of you can bring him back."

Thelma stood wiping at her eyes. Tears dribbled down her shrunken cheeks, into her mouth. "It was my fault. I wanted to destroy him. My hands —" She held up her claws. "He never trusted me; he never put himself in my care. And he was right."

"We both did it," Doris muttered, shaken. "Porter's telling the truth. I wanted him to go away . . . I wanted him to leave. I never moved anything into time, before."

"You never will again," Porter said. "He left no descendants. He was the first and the last man to

move through time. It was a unique talent."

Stephen was recovering slowly, still white-faced and shaken, eyes fixed on the withered shape in its frayed blue pajamas, spread out under the table. "Anyhow," he muttered finally, "there won't be any more picking over the past."

"I believe," Thelma said tightly, "you can follow my thoughts. Are you aware of what I'm thinking?"

Stephen blinked. "Yes."

"Now listen carefully. I'm going to put them into words so everybody will hear them."

Stephen nodded without speaking. His eyes darted frantically around the room, but he didn't stir.

"There are now four Guild members," Thelma said. Her voice was flat and low, without expression. "Some of us want to leave this place and enter the communes. Some of us think this would be a good time to impose ourselves on the communes, whether they like it or not."

Stephen nodded.

"I would say," Thelma continued, examining her ancient, dried-up hands, "that if any of us tries to leave here, I will do what Jack tried to do." She pondered. "But I don't know if I can. Maybe I'll fail, too."

"Yes," Stephen said. His voice trembled, then gained strength. "You're not strong enough. There's somebody here a lot stronger than you. She can pick you up and put you down anywhere she wants. On the other side of the world — on the moon — in the middle of the ocean."

Doris made a faint strangled sound. "I—"

"That's true," Thelma agreed. "But I'm standing only three feet from her. If I touch her first she'll be drained." She studied the smooth, frightened face of the girl. "But you're right. What happens depends not on you or me, but on what Doris wants to do."

Doris breathed rapidly, huskily. "I don't know," she said faintly. "I don't want to stay here, just sitting around in this old ruin, day after day, doing — tricks. But Jack always said we shouldn't force ourselves on the communes." Her voice trailed off uncertainly. "All my life, as long as I can remember, when I was a little girl growing up, there was Jack saying over and over again we shouldn't force them. If they didn't want us . . ."

"She won't move you now," Stephen said to Thelma, "but she will eventually. Sooner or later she'll move you away from here,

some night when you're sleeping. Eventually she'll make up her mind." He grinned starkly. "Remember, I can talk to her, silently in her mind. Any time I want."

"Will you?" Thelma asked the girl.

Doris faltered miserably. "I — don't know. *Will I?* . . . Maybe so. It's so —bewildering."

Porter sat up straight in his chair, leaned back, and belched loudly. "It's strange to hear you all conjecturing," he said. "As a matter of fact, you won't touch Thelma." To the old woman he said, "There's nothing to worry about. I can see this stalemate going on. The four of us balance each other — we'll stay where we are."

Thelma sagged. "Maybe Stephen's right. If we have to keep on living this way, doing nothing —"

"We'll be here," Porter said, "but we won't be living the way we've been living."

"What do you mean?" Thelma demanded. "How will we be living? *What's going to happen?*"

"It's hard to probe you," Stephen said to Porter peevishly. "These are things you've seen, not things you're thinking. Have the commune governments changed their position? Are they finally

going to call us in?"

"The governments won't call us in," Porter said. "We'll never be invited into the communes, any more than we were invited into Washington and Moscow. We've had to stand outside waiting." He glanced up and stated enigmatically, "That waiting is about over."

IT was early morning. Ed Garby brought the rumbling, battered truck, into line behind the other surface cars leaving the commune. Cold, fitful sunlight filtered down on the concrete squares that made up the commune installations; today was going to be another cloudy day, exactly like the last. Even so, the exit check-gate ahead was already clogged with outgoing traffic.

"A lot of them, this morning," his wife murmured. "I guess they can't wait any longer for the ash to lift."

Ed clutched for his pass, buried in his sweat-gummed shirt pocket. "The gate's a bottleneck," he muttered resentfully. "What are they doing, getting into the cars?"

There were four guards, today, not the usual one. A squad of armed troops that moved back and forth among the stalled cars, peering and murmuring, reporting

through their neck-mikes to the commune offices below surface. A massive truck loaded with workers pulled suddenly away from the line and onto a side road. Roaring and belching clouds of foul blue gas, it made a complete circle and lumbered back toward the center of the commune, away from the exit gate. Ed watched it uneasily.

"What's it doing, turning back?" Fear clutched him. "They're turning us back!"

"No, they're not," Barbara said quietly. "Look — there goes a car through."

An ancient war-time pleasure car precariously edged through the gate and out onto the plain beyond the commune. A second followed it and the two cars gathered speed to climb the long low ridge that became the first tangle of trees.

A horn honked behind Ed. Convulsively, he moved the car forward. In Barbara's lap the baby wailed anxiously; she wound its seedy cotton blanket around it and rolled up the window. "It's an awful day. If we didn't have to go —" She broke off. "Here come the guards. Get the pass out."

Ed greeted the guards apprehensively. "Morning."

Curtly, one of the guards took his pass, examined it, punched it, and filed it away in a steel-bound

notebook. "Each of you prepare your thumb for prints," he instructed. A black, oozing pad was passed up. "Including the baby."

Ed was astounded. "Why? What the hell's going on?"

The twins were too terrified to move. Numbly, they allowed the guards to take their prints. Ed protested weakly, as the pad was pushed against his thumb. His wrist was grabbed and yanked forward. As the guards walked around the truck to get at Barbara, the squad leader placed his boot on the running board and addressed Ed briefly.

"Five of you. Family?"

Ed nodded mutely. "Yeah, my family."

"Complete? Any more?"

"No. Just us five."

The guard's dark eyes bored down at him. "When are you coming back?"

"Tonight." Ed indicated the metal notebook in which his pass had been filed. "It says, before six."

"If you go through that gate," the guard said, "you won't be coming back. That gate only goes one way."

"Since when?" Barbara whispered, face ashen.

"Since last night. It's your choice. Go ahead out there, get

your business done, consult your soothsayer. But don't come back." The guard pointed to the side road. "If you want to turn around, that road takes you to the descent ramps. Follow the truck ahead — it's turning back."

Ed licked his dry lips. "I can't. My kid — she's got bone cancer. The old woman started her healing, but she isn't well, not yet. The old woman says today she can finish."

THE guard examined a dog-eared directory. "Ward 9, sixth level. Go down there and they'll fix up your kid. The docs have all the equipment." He closed the book and stepped back from the car, a heavy-set man, red-faced, with bristled, beefy skin. "Let's get started, buddy. One way or the other. It's your choice."

Automatically, Ed moved the car forward. "They must have decided," he muttered, dazed. "Too many people going out. They want to scare us . . . they know we can't live out there. We'd die out there!"

Barbara quietly clutched the baby. "We'll die here, eventually."

"But it's nothing but ruins out there!"

"Aren't *they* out there?"

Ed choked helplessly. "We can't come back — suppose it's a mis-

take?"

The truck ahead wavered toward the side road. An uncertain hand signal was made; suddenly the driver yanked his hand in and wobbled the truck back toward the exit gate. A moment of confusion took place. The truck slowed almost to a stop; Ed slammed on his brakes, cursed, and shifted into low. Then the truck ahead gained speed. It rumbled through the gate and out onto the barren ground. Without thinking, Ed followed it. Cold, ash-heavy air swept into the cabin as he gained speed and pulled up beside the truck. Even with it he leaned out and shouted, "Where you going? They won't let you back!"

The driver, a skinny little man, bald and bony, shouted angrily back, "God damn it, I'm not *coming* back! The hell with them — I got all my food and bedding in here — I got every damn thing I own. Let them try and get me back!" He gunned up his truck and pulled ahead of Ed.

"Well," Barbara said quietly, "it's done. We're outside."

"Yeah," Ed agreed shakily. "We are. A yard, a thousand miles — it's all the same." In panic, he turned wildly to his wife. "What if they don't take us? I mean, what if we get there and they don't

want us. All they got is that old broken-down wartime shelter. There isn't room for anybody — and look behind us."

A line of hesitant, lumbering trucks and cars was picking its way uncertainly from the gate, streaming rustily out onto the parched plain. A few pulled out and swung back; one pulled over to the side of the road and halted while its passengers argued with bitter desperation.

"They'll take us," Barbara said. "They want to help us — they always wanted to."

"But suppose they *can't*!"

"I think they can. There's a lot of power there, if we ask for it. They couldn't come to us, but we

can go to them. We've been held back too long, separated from them too many years. If the government won't let them in, then we'll have to go outside."

"Can we live outside?" Ed asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

Behind them a horn honked excitedly. Ed gained speed. "It's a regular exodus. Look at them pouring out. Who'll be left?"

"There'll be plenty left," Barbara answered. "All the big shots will stay behind." She laughed breathlessly. "Maybe they'll be able to get the war going again. It'll give them something to do, while we're away."

THE END



"Beat the United States to the Moon! Blunderer—we're in the wrong section of the multi-stage rocket!"

Nobody could explain the strange substance that suddenly began to deluge Earth. Tests proved it was harmless — and edible. It appeared to be —

MANNA

by

John Christopher

IT drifted down through the early morning air of North America. It was heavier than air, but not very much heavier. In color it was a pinky white, with the texture of a honeycomb, and the size of individual fragments ranged from a few inches to some feet in diameter. It had a smell that was tantalizing and strange and almost irresistible.

George Dell Parker, head janitor of a large office building in Boston, was probably the first to encounter it. At any rate, he put in the earliest report. He had once had journalistic ambitions, and he still made a few dollars a year by passing on such information that came his way as was newsworthy. He carried the fragment in his hand, when he went downstairs to telephone the *Monitor*.

The operator knew him. "City

Desk," George said.

"Yes, sir! I'll connect you with Mr. Lomax."

He was put on to the cub room. He had expected that. The reporter who took the call was tired and bored; there had been just enough doing during the night to keep him from getting more than an hour's sleep.

"O. K.," he said, "I'm listening."

George said: "There's some notably peculiar stuff floating down out of the sky, Mr. Lomax. I got a hunk of it right here beside the telephone. You want I should tell you all about it?"

"Public Health," Lomax said. "Try it on them. So the smog is killing us all by inches, it still isn't a story. Not in Boston it isn't."

"This is no smog," George looked down from the telephone at the



piece of the substance that lay, white with a pinky glow, against the battered yellow surface of his old desk. The smell of it pricked his nostrils. "This is sure enough no smog, Mr. Lomax. And it's big. This piece is maybe four inches across."

"Blown up from a garbage can, maybe."

"There's hardly any wind. I was up on the roof and I saw this piece coming down from the west, falling at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It near enough hit me, and went on to smack against the chimney stack. I went over and picked

it up, of course. It's not from any garbage can, Mr. Lomax. I guess I know as much about trash cans as anyone. It's kind of delicate looking, a sort of pearly mushroom color. I never saw anything like it. Smells powerful, too."

Lomax was beginning to make jottings on his pad. It was a story. An inch, maybe two inches.

"What does it smell of? Unpleasant?"

"No. It's a good smell, Mr. Lomax. Makes you want to put your teeth right into it. I never met it before, but it's good."

"Then put your teeth in it,

George. What are you waiting for? What's it taste like?"

"I don't know what it is, Mr. Lomax. It may be anything — poison."

"George, it's a hard drag trying to turn you into a reporter. We'll look after your widow."

"Haven't got a wife, Mr. Lomax."

"Then get those shiny teeth stuck in."

George lifted the piece up. Holding it under his nose, he could not believe that it could be poisonous. The smell was delicious. He broke off a corner and nibbled at it. The taste, like the smell, was something completely new. And it was completely satisfying.

Lomax said: "Well? You chewing yet?"

"It melts right away in your mouth, Mr. Lomax. You know what it is? It's manna. Manna, Mr. Lomax."

"Manna? That I don't get."

Lomax's failure to grasp a Biblical allusion neither surprised nor dismayed George. He explained it carefully.

"Like the Lord sent down to the Israelites, Mr. Lomax. The manna in the desert. That kind of manna." He was continuing to eat while he talked. "It sure has a heavenly taste, and it came right down out of the sky."

Yes, Lomax reflected. A story. "Manna from Heaven," he said,

more to himself than to George. Three inches, perhaps even more. He heard George say: "That's right, Mr. Lomax," and awoke to the immediate needs of the situation.

"Bring that manna in to me, George. Take a taxi."

There was a slight pause. George said: "I guess . . . I guess I've eaten it, Mr. Lomax. It kind of slipped down."

"Why, you fool, man!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lomax. It tasted so good."

"George," Lomax said bitterly, "don't go and get married for the next two or three hours. That widow's pension is out — right out."

"I'll go look on the roof. Maybe I'll find another piece."

"Don't bother," Lomax said. "Just don't bother."

Lomax put down the telephone as the cub room door opened. One of the night drivers came in.

"What do you make of this, Luke? Two or three hunks of it in the yard." He held his hand up, showing a piece of manna, a couple of inches square. "Smells good, too."

THE first fall was light, and concentrated on Boston. There were other light falls during the next week. Geographically the distribution was impartial; New Delhi made the second report close-

ly followed by Edinburgh, Stockholm, Melbourne and Buenos Aires. By that time the manna had been thoroughly analyzed. It had a highly complex organic structure, and no noxious properties as far as was known. At the same time, people were strongly advised against eating the manna until further tests, necessarily of long duration, had been made.

The tests of long duration were simply the investigation of the effects of manna on laboratory animals. The publication of the results of the preliminary analysis of manna was incomplete; that part of the analysts' report which remarked, with some astonishment, on the fact that manna contained high protein, high carbohydrate, essential fats and, as far as could be judged, all the essential vitamins, was circulated only to the governments of other nations, with the suggestion that it would be good policy to suppress this news until the tests on animals had put it in better perspective.

In the second week after the first fall, news from Moscow made it certain that the falls were planet-wide. The Russian report said much the same as the American one had and expressed the same caution.

Manna was front-page news..

The question of its point of origin naturally provoked the main

interest. In the first week, a moderately well known biologist allowed his astonishment to overcome his caution and described the substance as "unearthly." It was enough to start a riot of speculation. After a day or two, people began claiming to have seen flying saucers overhead at the same time as the manna was drifting down to earth. The Martians were sending manna, or the little men from Venus. The Governments made no haste to discourage this particular campaign; people were more likely to be cautious of what they ate if the Martians were thought to have sent it.

But the bubble was pricked, decisively enough, by other scientists. In the first place there was nothing in the structure of manna that suggested an extra-terrestrial origin; it could be placed, in fact, as a variant of normal fungus anatomy. In the second place, if the manna were released by flying saucers in the upper atmosphere, then its arrival data would be anything up to five hundred miles in space and ten hours in time from that point. If you saw a flying saucer overhead at the same time as the manna came down, then whatever it was it wasn't the same flying saucer as had released it.

Then where did the manna come from? The scientists had no opinions to offer. Time would prob-

ably tell. Generally it did.

For the readers of the world's press, there could be no such patient view. If it wasn't the Martians, it was the Russians who were doing it. A significance was now read into the fact that Moscow had been the last world center to report the arrival of manna. It was all part of a Russian trick.

This story was elaborated in some detail before the more obvious discrepancies began to be noticed. By what means could the Russians simultaneously shower Greenland and Patagonia, Cape Town and San Francisco? And what possible point could there be in bombarding other countries with a pleasant-smelling, pleasant-tasting fungus-like substance, that didn't even have the slogan: "Read the Daily Worker!" stamped on the back?

By this time the news of the food value of manna was beginning to leak out. It leaked out, for example, to Rustus Hereford, the junior member but the essential driving force of the board of directors of Ambrosia Inc. Less than three weeks after the first arrival of manna, he explained something of what he had learned to the other members of the board. He spoke to them deferentially but with the inner condescension of knowing that all this was but a very small part of the sphere that would eventually be his. And they listened in much

the reverse spirit, being aware of the same probabilities.

RUSTUS Hereford tapped a folio in front of him on the table.

"Government laboratory report, gentlemen. It's been checked, to the best of their ability, by our own laboratory staff. Manna, wherever it comes from, is the wonder food of all time. It's got everything, and packed so that it just slides down the throat. If it were on the commercial market we might as well shut up shop."

Gavin, the Chairman of the board, said drily: "Fortunately, it's not. That report you've got hold of — I take it the Government knows what its about in withholding it?"

"Naturally. They don't want to release something like that until at least half a dozen generations of mice have been fed on it."

"By which time," Gavin commented, "the manna may very well have stopped falling."

"That's my own view. Whatever the stuff is, there's no reason to think of it as a permanent phenomenon. Spinnet, in the lab, tells me about a writer named Charles Fort. He documented evidence of strange falls from the sky. Mostly from newspapers, but in good part from scientific periodicals. Listen to some of these falls:

"Russia, 1832 — a resinous yellow substance. Ireland, throughout the spring of 1695 — a clammy yellow substance like butter, which cattle fed on. France, 1863 — something like red meal, mixed with sand. England, 1686 — a cereal, like wheat. Michigan, 1901 — a brown dust of vegetable matter. Canada, 1868 — dark coloured vegetable matter, almost decomposed . . . total fall of 500 tons estimated."

Rustus Hereford looked up. "That's a sample. There's a lot more. Now, I'm not interested in Fort's conjectures about the falls; I don't suppose that you are, either. What is interesting is that the falls came, and then stopped. I think we can assume the same will be true of the present fall of manna."

Von Eckers, the sales director, asked him: "What's your plan, Rustus?"

"Stockpile it. Buy up whatever we can. We can say we're buying it for research purposes, and to a certain extent it will be true, though the lab people don't think much of the chances of duplicating it. Then put it in the deep freeze. When manna has stopped dropping and the Government report has told people how the mice thrived on it, we shall have a nice little luxury product on ice. Caviar will be out."

Gavin objected: "It looks like a

long chance. The stuff may stop falling tomorrow — today. Is it worth our while to undertake an operation of this scale for a profit that may be no more than a few dollars?"

"I'll always go after a few dollars if there's a chance in a thousand of them leading me to a million. What do we lose?"

He had his way; he was used to doing so. In three months' time he reported the acquisition of more extensive deep freezer space for the manna and the entry of some belated rivals into the field. Six months later again, he addressed another board meeting.

"At present count, gentlemen," he said, "this company has in stock approximately fifteen thousand cubic feet of manna. Once the manna stops falling, I estimate this as worth not much short of fifteen million dollars in luxury food. The first frozen manna has been sampled and shows no signs of deterioration. The Government report on manna will be issued tomorrow morning. It confirms the first reports of the food's edibility and nutritive content, and advises that it can be consumed without any fear of bad effects, providing, of course, that it has not been contaminated on the ground."

The only trouble," Gavin said, "is that it hasn't stopped falling."
"Not yet. But it must even-

tually. Some of the falls Fort catalogued ran for months, but they all ended. We only have to sit tight."

GAVIN'S nephew, Peter Gavin, asked: "What's the latest official theory about the stuff, anyway?"

Rustus Hereford shook his head. "None official. The view that strikes most people as the most plausible is that something—nuclear fusion tests, maybe or just Mother Nature — has triggered off a fungus mutation. But nobody can suggest where except that it should be somewhere pretty high, to account for the wind distribution—probably several high places . . . the Andes, the Himalayas — that sort of setting. Biologically it's difficult to see how this wind distribution business fits in — the manna that does fall has no spores that they can recognize and it certainly doesn't start manna colonies. Maybe there's a complex involving barometric pressure, hours of sunlight, and so on, which triggers off spore production when met. They don't know."

Gavin looked up slowly. "If that theory is true, there is no reason to expect the falls to stop. Rather you could expect them to increase."

Rustus Hereford nodded. "Yeah." "Well?"

Rustus Hereford smiled. "I'm waiting for them to turn up one

manna source. Just one. Don't think they haven't been looking — in the Andes and the Himalayas and even here in the Rockies."

Gavin said: "In that case, where does the stuff come from? From outer space? Someone suggests that in the Herald-Tribune today — that the planet, the solar system, might be passing through a cloud of it. Is that your view?"

Rustus Hereford said: "If that were what was happening, do you know what we would be collecting? Cinders! There have been cinder falls, but the manna I've tasted doesn't give the impression."

"Then you think . . .?"

"I don't think anything, except in terms of profit and loss. When the falls stop, we've got a fortune in our lockers."

Von Eckers said: "When." There was something in his voice that focused their attention on him. He said apologetically: "I've been looking out of the window."

They followed his gaze. It was like a snowstorm, with incredibly large flakes. The sky was thick with it, drifting down on a sharp north-east wind. Gavin, who had a fad about fresh air, had opened some of the windows at the beginning of the meeting, to augment the air conditioning. While they watched, a flake of manna curled in on a vagrant draught of air and eddied down. Before their dumb-

founded eyes, it came to rest on the table around which they were sitting.

Young Peter Gavin said uneasily: "Just think — if it doesn't stop . . ." He laughed at the thought, but his laugh wasn't happy. "If it goes on falling, in greater and greater quantities — and that Government reports says it's O. K. to eat — what if people get to eating it? It's free. It's free and it tastes wonderful and the Government says it's full of vitamins. Who's going to buy our stuff? And what's all the manna in our deep freezes worth if it keeps on coming down like this?"

Rustus Hereford picked up the piece that had come in. It wasn't very big. He looked at it for a moment, and then put it in his mouth. After he had swallowed it, he said:

"If it does — I don't know what will happen, but I know one thing that won't." They looked at him. "We won't starve."

IN various countries there had been lobbying by food interests against the publication of official reports approving the food value of manna, but in every case they had lost. No government that has to appeal to an electorate with general adult franchise dared lift a finger against the cry for cheap food, and

this food was free. The food interests settled back into resignation at the prospect of decreased profits, and possible losses, until one of two things happened — the manna stopped falling or people got tired of the taste.

The unfortunate result was that neither thing happened. In fact, the manna fell more and more heavily and more and more universally, and far from getting tired of the taste, people who had eaten it became increasingly reluctant to eat anything else. The cry was, in fact, raised that manna incorporated some kind of drug that produced addiction, but tests fail to bear out the claim. Human guinea-pigs were found to live on non-manna diets after varying periods of manna-only diets; they reported no physical or psychological ill effects, but they were very glad to go back to manna when the tests were over.

Three years after the first fall, manna was dropping in sufficient quantity to feed the world. Rustus Hereford, who, on the failure of Ambrosia, Inc. two years earlier, had been invited into a State Department post, was present at a meeting in which an official Government attitude towards manna was finally hammered out. He heard the President say:

"We don't know where it comes from, and we don't know what it is. All right, gentlemen, all right! It's

a fungus structure, and you guess some isolated high mountain sources, but the fact remains that no one has managed to identify a source. Your guess strikes me as being about as near the truth as that of a certain gentleman with religious views who has gone on record as explaining that we are in a spiritual wilderness. It may be a good guess, but it gets us no place.

"The question we are faced with, primarily, is the problem of manna in relation to the feeding habits of this nation. A month ago the last food marketing concern went out of business. The farmers have been living on relief for over eighteen months, and those of them who are any good are doing their damndest to get into some other kind of work — for they can see no future in their own.

"The Government's first concern was as to the edibility of manna. We have checked that, and triple checked it. The fifteenth generation descendants of the mice that were first fed on manna are frisking around in the pink of physical condition. There's some suggestion that they may be a little better at mouse IQ tests, too, but statistically it's only just significant, and we needn't bother about that. The point is that manna is good for you.

"The Government's second concern, apart from its natural concern at the disruption in national life

caused by manna becoming the staple diet, must be to secure against something that could precipitate the worst disaster in history — the end of the falls of manna. Fortunately that security can be achieved. Manna stores, with no loss of quality, in deep freeze containers. We already have extensive deep-freeze storage, and we are in the process of multiplying that capacity a hundred fold. In addition we are planning to maintain adequate seed stocks of all pre-manna foodstuffs. We aim to have at least two years' supply of manna in hand. Should the falls cease, we can be back onto a normal agricultural economy in less than half that time."

The President paused. He picked up a fragment of manna from the tray in front of him and nibbled it thoughtfully.

"Well, gentlemen," he inquired, "any questions?"

RUSTUS Hereford sat behind his grade A desk and looked at the man Cafferty had just brought in. He was a little man, and although his face was deeply wrinkled, Rustus did not guess him to be more than forty. He sat, not quite at his ease, in the visitor's chair. Rustus leaned forward.

"Cigarette?"

The man took one. "Thanks."

Rustus checked the dossier that

had been completed in the outer office. He looked up again.

"Your name's Thomas Herbert — Herbert's your family name, that right?" The man nodded. "You know why you've been brought in?"

Thomas Herbert shook his head. "They didn't tell me."

"I'll tell you. I'm interested in you. You run a farming group in Maine. I want to know why."

"There's nothing against it?"

"Nothing. It's a free country. You can walk right out of that door, and pause on the way to tell me to go to hell. But I'd like to know. I may as well tell you that this is not an official inquiry at all. It's a personal one. I'm very interested in manna and in peoples' reactions to it. When it first started dropping I made an error of judgment about the stuff. I lost a lot of money — my own and other peoples'."

Herbert looked at him curiously. "I guess the source of your information about what I do must have told you the kind of people I have up at my place. Cranks. What makes you interested in cranks?"

"Cranks . . ." Rustus said thoughtfully. "Working in the fields when you don't have to, building up stocks of agricultural equipment and machines — I guess cranks do those kind of things. But some other things seem funny. I hear you've got a good technical

and scientific library — books and microfilms — up at that place?"

"Pretty good."

"I also hear that you've got a deep-freeze unit up there, and that you've got it stocked with, of all things, manna. Could that be right?"

"It could."

"Then the crank label doesn't fit."

"It may not fit, but it suits us well enough."

"Look," Rustus said. "What are you doing? You've got a theory about manna. What is it? I want to know for my own peace of mind, and if it's any good at all I'll get from behind this desk and join you. If you'll have me, I will."

Herbert said slowly. "No, cranks doesn't fit. But uneasy people would do. My friends up there are all uneasy people. They don't trust manna, and they do trust me. I didn't have to sell any of them any theories or ideas to get them there, or to keep them there. I'm sorry, Mr. Secretary, but I'm not looking particularly for converts. I've got nothing to tell you."

"If there had been nothing," Rustus said, "—really nothing, then you'd have told me something. That's true, isn't it? There is something. You have got a theory, and a purpose?"

Herbert looked at him. "I'll give you that. But that's all I give you."

I've got a theory, all right, and a purpose, but I don't even think of them in my own mind if I can help it, and I never expect to make a friend close enough for me to share it with. Those who take me, take me on trust."

Rustus grinned wryly. "Take it or leave it — that right? You win. I'm uneasy myself. My resignation goes in today. I can be with you in a month, on the dot. Will you take me?"

"We'll take you."

WITHIN a year, Rustus had taken almost entire charge of the administration of the colony. Thomas Herbert was glad to pass the handling over to him, and to stay himself in the background. The two men got on well together. Herbert did no more than throw out a suggestion from time to time; when he did it was acted on with alacrity by Rustus. And in between those times, Rustus exercised his tireless energy on keeping things ticking over quietly and evenly. The small group increased in size, but slowly. A year after Rustus joined, there were forty-one of them, an increase of seven. There were sixteen married couples, and nine children.

Late one afternoon, Rustus backed the bulldozer away from a bank he had been tearing down, and saw Herbert sitting on the stump of a

tree nearby. Herbert called and Rustus climbed down.

"You look hot, Rusty. I brought a jar of beer along."

Rustus drank deeply. He wiped the sweat from his face with his forearm. "Thanks, Tom. I was thirsty, all right."

He sat down beside Herbert. Herbert nodded towards the western horizon.

"Fine old sunset."

The sky was green and gold, heaped up with indigo clouds. High in the air there were golden flecks; flecks that drifted down towards the waiting earth.

"Good manna shower tonight."

Herbert lit his pipe and began drawing on it. "Spoils the view to my way of looking."

"It goes on and on." Rustus looked at him. "I wish I knew what the hell we were waiting for."

Herbert did not say anything for a moment. When he did, it was to the accompaniment of a jerk of his pipe towards the bulldozer.

"Don't like the sound of that engine. I should get Hank to have a look at it in the morning, before you take it out again."

Rustus grinned. The conversation had been turned like this before. He said:

"You've done a few different things in your time, Tom."

Herbert watched the smoke curl up from his pipe. "I guess so.

Grade-school teacher, travelling salesman, garage mechanic, window cleaner, dog catcher, rat killer . . . I never seemed to find the job to settle down in. Maybe this is it." He glanced sardonically at Rustus.

"Having knocked around so much, I'm happy enough. "Come day, go day, God send Sunday," as my old man used to say."

Rustus said: "I figure it's a good philosophy at that."

"Depends whether you've got a restless nature. You have, Rusty. How'd you like a trip to the big town?"

"More books?"

Herbert nodded. "And some instruments. Can you go tomorrow? Hank can be stripping the dozer."

RUSTUS had not been away from the settlement since his first arrival, apart from one early trip to Sanford. He looked at New York with interest. There didn't seem to be any great change in the place; the people were still breaking their necks to get from one block to the next, and if one missed the pungent smell of the small hash-joints, the gasoline fumes made up for that. He collected together the books and instruments Herbert had asked for, and left the next morning for what he now thought of as home.

Herbert checked through the stuff. He nodded at last. "That's

O. K." His look went up to Rustus. "How was it, Rusty? Didn't get too home-sick for the bright lights?"

Rustus shook his head decisively. "Nothing like that."

"Applejack?" Herbert asked. He poured from the stone jar into two glasses. The two were sitting in Herbert's cabin, on wooden chairs beside a wooden table. There was an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling, because the generator had gone on the blink.

Rustus took the drink. He raised his glass. "Here's to us — the uneasy people."

Herbert nodded "I'll join you."

Rustus said: "I'm still not asking you what's in your mind, Tom. But I'm going to tell you what I've been thinking it was. I've been thinking that maybe someone, somehow, was sending the manna deliberately. And that the intention was to sap folks morale. You know the principle: hand-out makes for bums. Someone was trying to turn the West — the world, maybe — into a bunch of loafers. In the end civilization would just curl up and die. It didn't seem too fantastic a notion to me; I was trained in big business.

"But that's not the way things are coming out, Tom. New York is turning on its spindle just as fast as ever. People aren't any different. They eat manna, and they eat noth-

ing else but manna, but outside of that they aren't changed at all."

He waited for Herbert to say something. There was silence for a moment. Then Herbert said:

"I'm glad you got that McGuire book. It was never published in this country, and the London edition has been out of print for ten years. But it's a very useful book."

Rustus said quietly: "I'm still not to be trusted. Is that it, Tom?"

Herbert said: "Trust doesn't come into this, Rusty. Maybe . . . Look, Rusty. What's in my mind is too crazy to talk about. I told you before you came that this outfit operates on a crazy hunch. I don't want to keep you if you want to go. Go and eat manna and live a normal life, if that's the way you'd rather have it. I'd be sorry as hell to see you go, for more than one reason. But if you've started being uneasy about me and not about the rest of the world, then I don't see how you can stay."

Their eyes met and held. Rustus said: "You're the boss, Tom."

IT was three or four months later that Hank reported the auto wreck. The road between Sanford and Springvale ran fairly close to the settlement; it was not an especially busy road, especially now, at the beginning of winter. The auto was a six-seater convertible, and it had its nose in the ditch.

Hank said: "I don't know how he came to kill hisself. Paint's no more than scratched."

Herbert said: "He's dead?"

"Dead right enough. Face twisted real nasty."

Herbert said: "Where is he?" His voice was grim. "I'd like you to come along, too, Rusty."

They got the driver out of the car. He was a man about forty, and his dead face was contorted in an agonized grimace of pain. Herbert looked at him for a moment.

"Heart failure?" Hank suggested. "Scared hisself to death?"

Herbert said: "Bury him, Hank. Rusty and I will take a run into Sanford. Think this car will run?"

"Don't see why not."

While Hank was checking the car's engine, Herbert said to Rusty: "How's your stomach? If it's not too good, you'd better stay here."

Rustus still did not know what Herbert was driving at, but in some way his curiosity had soured. He said briefly: "Good enough, I guess."

They met death on the way in to town—death sprawled in a hundred different attitudes of agony and despair. In the town itself, the sidewalks were thick with bodies, as though the dying had come crowding out for air. Herbert stopped the car when it could be seen that the road itself was impassible, just a

little way ahead.

The words almost choking him, Rustus said:

"O. K. You can tell me now, I guess. The manna? But I don't get it. It was all right. They checked it and triple checked it!"

Herbert said: "The reason I wouldn't tell you, Rutsy . . . when I first had the idea, I tried to tell people. That was in the early days. They thought I was mad — mad in a nasty way. One time it was touch and go whether I was certified. After that, I didn't tell anybody."

Rustus said: "But it was good. You even put some in deep freeze up at the settlement."

"Then it was good. The idea . . . I got it from one of the jobs I used to do. There it was good at first. You could have checked it any way. You get their confidence first with the *good* stuff. Then the stuff is . . . slightly different."

Rustus stared at the heaped parade of corpses. "The stuff . . .?" he echoed.

Herbert spoke the word softly. "*Bait!* That's the way you kill rats. Rats are cunning devils. You can't just put poison down and expect them to take it. You've got to feed them up first."

"My God! Who . . . the Russians?"

Herbert shook his head. "I wouldn't like to see Moscow right

now."

"Then. . ."

Herbert looked up, into the pale blue wintry sky. "We haven't met them yet. I guess we will eventually. They may just have killed to wipe out a future danger, but it's more likely they want our planet."

"From outer space? But it was proved the manna wouldn't hold together in that kind of fall . . . it would fry, too."

Herbert said wearily: "That's easy enough. It isn't hard to work out a container that will dissolve — burn maybe — at the right height, and release the contents for a short drop."

Rustus looked up at the sky himself, and back to the tumbled bodies.

"The swine!"

"Swine, all right."

Despair was heavy on him. "And they've won."

Herbert began backing the car. "Not yet they haven't."

"What can a group like ours do?"

"Organize. There will be others who've missed the poison. People sick maybe, or just fasting. We'll find them, or they will find us. When our rat-killing friends drop down. . ."

"We don't know anything about them — what weapons they may have."

"Two things we know — they preferred *not* to risk a straight

fight, and they're poisoners. I've got another hunch, Rusty. I've got a hunch that when they come they're going to be over-confident. They may expect some of the rats

to be alive, but they won't expect them to be in fighting trim."

"No, by God!" Rustus said. "They won't."

THE END

★ *To Mars — In Our Time?* ★

SHORTLY after the World Science Fiction Convention in London, another meeting was held, dedicated essentially to the same ideal, but radically different in outlook and intention. The Second International Congress on Astronautics drove a few more spikes into the platform it is erecting, and the members were as enthusiastic as a group of science fiction fans as they discussed the ways and means of launching Man into space!

The outstanding point of the Convention is the fact that it was made up of scientists, rocket engineers, astronomers, and a hundred other pure technicians whose starry-eyed idealism is backed by hard muscle and cold metal.

Step by step the members outlined the plans for conquering space. They are almost too familiar to require reiteration; the launching of the first step-rockets, the building of a satellite to encircle the Earth and finally the launching of the Moon rocket from this satellite. These are familiar ideas but each one was backed by calculation and analysis; these things are no longer imaginary—they are in the realm of current technology.

Perhaps the high point of the meeting was the reading of Werner von Braun's paper on a tenta-

tive Martian flight. Ordinarily this project is shelved in the back of the minds of most scientists, but coming from von Braun, it merited more than a passing interest for von Braun is the world's foremost rocketeer.

Like a machine ticking off second sounds, point by point von Braun's paper took up the problems of a Martian flight. Obviously it would be a colossal undertaking, involving almost fifty, three-stage rockets, and dependent upon the successful establishment of a satellite rocket. But astonishing though the concept may be, it is by no means impossible. From the satellite station, von Braun envisions the rocket fleet making for Mars, where it would establish a satellite around *that* planet and from this satellite a single ship would drop "Marswards."

The fuel requirements for such a journey are incredible—more than five million tons—but as von Braun pointed out, that amount is but one-tenth of the quantity used in the Berlin airlift. With facts and numbers and calculations, the hypothetical Mars-project was nailed down, and even the skeptical newspapermen assigned to cover the meeting looked thoughtful. The Interplanetary Age is closer than you think!

1.



2.



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THE CRITIC

by

Raymond E. Banks

Whitesquare wanted to regain his title as a big-time promoter. But could his boy, Tyellen, withstand the Champion's deadly mental arsenal?

HE got to Madison Square Garden late—about seven o'clock. Outside the lights blazed, but the audience was already inside, waiting for the prelims. A few late comers hurried past the boxoffice and he could already hear the impatient stamp and shuffle of the hungry mob.

It was a blood match and he knew in the next few hours he would see a human body and soul put to extreme agony — either raised to a pinnacle or crushed beyond any hope of recovery.

And he—Whitesquare — who used to be the King of the Promoters was doing this for a collection of money-hungry lizards. He was doing it because he was totally broke. And he was trying to do it with a Chinese slum kid.

The portrait of the narrow, yellow face stared at him from one of

the billboards, and the liquid eyes seemed to drill into him. He avoided the eyes and hurried on down the alleyway to the professional's entrance.

Early snowflakes fell; dry papers scuttled in the alleyway as he made his way back. He shivered and dug his hands deeper in his pockets. It had been a long time now, since he'd had a drink. He sure needed a drink—

In the Ready Room he inhaled the sights and smells of paint and sweat and clay and makeup. It had been a long time for Whitesquare since he'd first entered a Critic's Ready Room, but the old magic still gave him a tingle.

His Critic, Tyellen, was in the Doc's office, weighing in for a final check. You could hear the hum and sputter of the electronic machines that tested him.

Outside the trainers stood around. His bosses, if you please.

Atterbury, the St. Louis painter who had kicked in ten thousand. Blake, the musician who had been good for another ten thousand. And Sims, Maddington, Kelley — representing drama, the dance and sculptoring. Their eyes popping. Their cheeks flushed. This was big-time and they were all scared. More scared than his Chinese boy, if you could believe that. They descended on him in a cloud.

All but Cheryl. Cheryl was his special hate. Cheryl still was beautiful at thirty-five. Cheryl who knew him like a book. She had once been awed by the great Whitesquare. And pleased by him. He remembered the Cheryl who used to get up out of bed in his Riverside Drive apartment, prettily modest in her underclothing, and dip into his wallet and pluck out a five hundred dollar bill to go shopping that afternoon.

It had been a long time ago that there was money like that in Whitesquare's wallet. It had been long since Cheryl had been to his now-modest Brooklyn apartment.

This time it had been Whitesquare, going to Cheryl with trembling hands, begging for money for the last six thousand he needed to match up Tyellen in the Garden.

It was his own money, begged back from her. Cheryl had been

wise—saved, played it smart. He had been lavish.

If they won tonight, he'd be even with the board again.

If they lost—

You don't think about things like that. The younger men shoulder you aside and things get rougher and rougher and you keep drinking and dreaming and dreaming, drinking and dreaming—

A year ago Whitesquare had finally pulled out of it. Stopped drinking and dreaming. Tonight might decide how his life would end, and he knew it in his bones. You could find plenty of ex-promoters down in the bowery, begging for a bottle of wine, stuffing papers into their beat-up shoes — wearing the rags of their last good suit.

Cheryl sucked on a cigarette, and her lip turned down in scorn as she looked at him.

The others buzzed like worrisome flies. Why was he late? Did he think Tyellen was a good enough Critic? Was Tyellen over-trained?

He couldn't blame them. It was their life-savings.

Atterbury shoved some pictures at him.

"Can I have Tyellen go over this stuff again?"

They were cheap prints from the National Gallery. Poor stuff to train a Critic on. Whitesquare re-

pressed a shudder. "You'll have your chance," he said non-committally.

Maddington had a movie. "I want to show Tyellen one more dance," he said. "Only take fifteen minutes. Some Hopi Indian dances I borrowed."

Whitesquare smiled at his naivety. In fifteen minutes Tyellen would be in the ring. "We'll see," he murmured.

Like worrisome flies. Buzz, buzz.

And Cheryl grinning. His mouth felt very dry. A drink — just one — would sure go down easy.

He started for Doc's medicine cabinet. But Cheryl cut him off. He could smell her faint, sex-distilled perfume that used to do so much to him.

"No drinks. Not while you're spending my six grand, Whitey." He could feel the fine sweat on his brow. "Who wants a drink?" he lied, shucking his coat and throwing it on top of the cabinet. "We've got work to do!"

He jumped up on one of the training tables and blew his silver whistle—thank God he still had that! He wore the gym sweat coveralls that were his trademark. Even sneakers. They expected that. They looked reassured. He could see himself in the mirror. A faded version of the old Whitesquare, maybe, but still the big-time promoter.

"Paint," he said, "sculpture,

music, dance, drama, psychiatrist, masseur, sex. Okay, all present and accounted for. Now hear my words, kids—"

One of the ushers opened the door from the auditorium and the darkened hall outside and the pink lights blasted in on them. Some preliminaries were performing, and grotesque shadows leaped across the grimy wall.

"Take a look at it," he told them. "The torture chamber out there. The place where it happens. Tonight we're going to take a human being and rip the soul from his body. It's a sober thing—the kid can't do it on his own. Your jobs are to repair the bleeds, the cuts, the tieups and the blocks. To put him through like he was a robot. Stop thinking of him as a human now. But it's his life . . . and that's why there can't be mistakes. Not because it's your money — because it's his life."

A thousand nights before he'd given that speech. Cheryl's lip curled, but the others drank it in.

"This is a title go. You're working with Whitesquare. You get big rocks if you win — nothing if you lose. But most of all you're getting the thrill that few humans on earth today can know. You're participating in a team endeavor against one of the greatest Critics alive, Tom Watts. If Tyellen goes, we all go with him. But if he dies — a part

of us dies—”

He let that sink in.

“Any questions?”

There were none. At least his backers were artists, and they were anxious to do the thing.

It was seven-twenty.

“All right. From now on things happen in millionths of a second.”

He nodded to the usher that guarded the Doc's door.

“Let's have Tyellen.”

TYELLEN was always a shock to him. After all, he had once handled Smallwood and Terramanagua. Tyellen wasn't much to look at. But Tyellen was good, of course. How good was anybody's guess. God knows, Whitesquare liked to have them five years before bringing them into the Garden. He'd had Tyellen a year and he was still afraid of him.

Whitesquare didn't dare show it. He felt Tyellen over, rubbing his arms and shoulders, testing the muscle-tone. He looked in his mouth, studied his eyes. A Critic has to be in good physical shape.

There was a knee tremble. Whitesquare pretended not to notice.

The psychiatrist handed Whitesquare a report. One word on it: “Scared.”

Tyellen wasn't alone in that.

Whitesquare patted the yellow egg that was Tyellen's head.

“You're trained to a pip. You're going all the way, son!”

Tyellen answered with a wordless, shallow grin.

“All right, trainers, get busy!”

He held the stop-watch on them. First Atterbury consulted with the Critic, testing reactions to the post-card size duplicate pictures from the National Gallery. Tyellen seemed a little slow in his judgments. Whitesquare stopped them with a pip on his whistle and passed Tyellen to Maddington. Maddington gave a chaotic spurt of advice, and in the absence of time to show his film of the Hopi Indian dance, tried to unreel the film and show Tyellen the frames.

Whitesquare stopped that, too. He let the others get at him, but doubted that it helped. A last word from the trainers to a Critic never helped. Cheryl's send-off was the best. She took the lad's yellow head between her hands and kissed him on the mouth. Whitesquare grinned wryly — that used to carry sock! But, of course, Tyellen was too tense too feel it.

“Good luck, Mr. Challenger,” she muttered.

Then an usher came in and said “Title go!” Whitesquare pipped again on his whistle and Tyellen slid out of his training trunks into the show trunks — the checkered trunks that were Whitesquare's trademark.

They marched into the arena—a small Chinese lad, followed by five amateurs, an amused prostitute, and one burned-out promoter. Whitesquare wanted to laugh, but the laughter turned bitter in his throat.

THEY strapped Tyellen into the chair.

Electrode at head and leg. Cowl plate over the shaved pate. Safety belt across his chest. Blinding white lights beat down on them as they milled about Tyellen, conscious of the excited crowd. The ring was a long rectangle, at the other end of which sat Tom Watts and his crew, strapping the World's Champion to his chair.

The announcer did his stuff:

"In this corrrnerrrr, aged thirty-eight years, at one hundred and eighty pounds, grrrraduate of the New York Fine Arts Academy, first Champion of New Yorrrk State, then Champion of the East, then of the West—poet and painter, dancer and sculptor, Critic most eminent—His Excellency PRESENT WORLD CHAMPION Thomas H. Watts!"

The animal roar from the crowd seemed to make the building shake. Harry Cane, the Champ's promoter stepped around the ring taking the kudos, since his boy was strapped in the chair. Under his cowl-plate Watts grinned his lop-sided grin.

He had a personality the crowd really warmed to.

"And in this corrrnerrrr, aged thirty-one, a prrrresent to us from San Francisco's Chinatown, at one hundred and twenty-five pounds, grrrraduate of the Los Angeles Conservatory, winner of twenty major Judgings, editor, writer, thinkerrrr and philosopherrrr extraordinaire, your challenger, the man with one name—TYELLEN!"

Another roar. For four years now Watts had turned back all comers, big and small, hard and easy, young and old. In a culture-based society, Watts was almost a god, a legend. So Tyellen had the underdog's share of the applause.

But as Whitesquare stepped off the Promoter's Dance the boos came. Not for Tyellen, for Whitesquare. He had had his cream years.

Head-bands. There was a rustle and sliding sound now as the audience put on the blindfolds that also covered their ears. Each observer plugged into the electric outlet at his seat. Just below Whitesquare an elderly lady fitted on a head-band that sparkled with diamonds. Two seats from her, a man in a shiny suit adjusted a worn, dun-colored band to his head. They had 'em all tonight—society and servants, the top and the bottom . . .

Whitesquare slipped out of the

ring and joined his trainers. He took his position at the console of the amplifier. The trainers clustered about him. Somebody breathed on his neck. Chatter, buzz, chatter, buzz, a humorless, nervous laugh.

"Would you mind not breathing down my neck?" Whitesquare snapped at Sims, and the man drew back abashed. But Cheryl, smoking the inevitable cigarette, made her hand shake in derision at his tenseness and he turned back quickly to the board.

Absolute silence now in the hall. Just the shuffle of a few latecomers and an occasional gasp as somebody got a shock from a shorted head-band. The ushers quickly stepped forward to take care of that.

The Referee appeared, ring center. "I warn both Critics to keep it clean. These sensations are being recorded in personalities. No indulging in personalities. No advice from the trainers. I want a sharp, clean judging, the best man to win. Ready, Tyellen?"

"Ready," said Whitesquare, nervously turning the dials.

"Ready, Watts?"

"Ready."

The Referee made a vast clock windup motion with his arm and ran off the stage. Immediately the mood music started. Now only Tyellen and Watts could see what was there on the stage, see the

lights, hear the music. For the audience and the crews and judges, sight and sound were totally blocked off by the head-bands.

AN artist came forward with a picture. He set it on an easel in the center of the ring, stepped back. Whitesquare, at the Control console, flicked on the intercom.

"Free and easy, boy," he told Tyellen.

"I am confident," said Tyellen.

Whitesquare felt the sweat on his face as Tyellen rolled his mobile chair out to the picture and stared at it. Atterbury, the paint trainer, leaned on Whitesquare's shoulders, muttering to himself. The picture was a still life, done in oils. Whitesquare could feel Tyellen's heart-beat as the Critic emptied his mind and studied the picture. The image on Tyellen's brain sang along the wires to the console where Whitesquare found what he wanted, amplified it, and sent it along to the audience. Tyellen's brain images impinged on the audience, but they couldn't hear the intercom between Whitesquare and Tyellen.

"Concentrate," interrupted Atterbury, the paint trainer, on the intercom. "Now that picture—"

"Cut it," snapped Whitesquare.

"Warning Tyellen," called the Referee. "No advice from trainers."

Whitesquare winched. The ama-

teurism of a trainer breaking concentration! Damn! On Watts' side everything would be spotlessly professional.

Expectancy rolled across Tyellen's mind, stopped. It wasn't a very good picture, after all. Tyellen wheeled and maneuvered in front of it, seeing it from all angles, changing the overhead lights as needed, looking for mood and meaning. You could feel the association patterns carried along in surges with the heart-beat. Tyellen picked out the good points and fed a tiny gout of emotion, syrup-smooth, through. Then he sent shock as he discovered the poor lines and his fine, artistic sense rejected the texture which was too bold for the subject. Whitesquare picked up what he liked and amplified it out to the audience through his control board.

Tyellen wheeled back to his place.

Watts had the floor now. As he wheeled up and attacked the picture, you could feel the self-confidence in his mind, the old trumper doing the work he got paid for, the smooth, emotionally-mature professional. His eyes lazily flicked the canvas for a few seconds, and he gave everyone a ripple of laughter and enjoyment as he handled the picture in his mind, sucked the fun of it off canvas, transmitted it cleanly, and deliberately turned his back on it and

wheeled to his place.

Watt's point! A blue slash appeared in everyone's peripheral vision.

Fear!

"So he was lucky," said Whitesquare. He stepped up the current.

"You're overloading me," groaned Tyellen.

"I need more feeling."

"You'll burn me out too early."

Atterbury started to chatter on the intercom again. "For Christ's sake, Whitesquare, give the boy a chance!"

"He's green-weak," said Sims, chiming in "Tell him to watch out for greens."

"Warning," said the Referee. "There's too much talk on that Tyellen intercom."

Whitesquare jerked off his headband and turned to Atterbury. "You want to take over?" he asked acidly.

"No—no— I only meant—"

"Well, shut up—all of you." He wryly remembered the old days when he could hire his own trainers. In those days if a trainer so much as burped during a Judging he was fired.

Whitesquare went back to Tyellen, but it was too late. The squabble had unnerved him.

"I can't stand all that current, Whitesquare," he groaned. "Cut it down."

Whitesquare cursed and eased

the current. It was already below what the lad trained with — but his nerves were tight enough to strum a tune on.

A vase came next. Watts and Tyellen paired on that one. The Artist had worked in a joke about the National House of Censors that Tyellen caught and Watts didn't. No score.

Then came Claudel with his abstract. Whitesquare jumped as if shot. He tore off his head-band and turned to his paint trainer.

"Atterbury! I thought you agreed with Watts' people not to judge abstracts. Tyellen doesn't like 'em!"

Atterbury colored. "Well—I— they wanted one or two, and one or two seemed reasonable, Chief . . ."

Whitesquare felt sick. A good trainer would've settled that in the Paint Conference when the art objects for the Judging were agreed upon. He had checked the lists himself and there were no abstracts. But he'd failed to check the options! It was his own fault.

An inside voice asked him: Slipping, Whitesquare? He wet his dry lips, caught Cheryl's frown at his mistake.

"Fight it through," he told Tyellen.

"Thanks to all for throwing me curves," said Tyellen, wheeling forward uncertainly. His mind threw off a flash of blind anger,

strong enough to get past Whitesquare's damping action to the audience and Whitesquare felt a chill. There were emotions bubbling in Tyellen that he didn't like.

TYELLEN wheeled up to study the garish colored maze, which Claudel had named "Economy-based society." That was one of Claudel's major works and people stirred in anticipation as they saw the picture through the mind of Tyellen. Here on a three-foot square of canvas, Claudel had caught all of the extracted meaning of twenty-one centuries of man's history. His life in the caves, struggling with the massive beasts of pre-history. Further along the maze, stone and flint shapes of tribal life. The footweariness of nomadic times, a hint of Egyptian and Greco-Roman cultures in gracious, classically perfect lines. The baronical splendor of the middle ages, denoted by a hazy, terrifying cross and a battle-axe. The Renaissance sun, and the quickening forces of the industrial revolution. Big industries, big Government, totalitarian deviations and the Cadillac Age, suggested by the phallic rear-bumper design, smoke scrawls and a broken torso. Twenty-one centuries of man's history gleamed on the canvas.

Almost everyone in America in this culture age had a copy of

Claudel's "Civilization," Whitesquare knew. He himself could've drawn it from memory right down to the end where Claudel had painted the punch-tape symbolism of the age of the automatic factory which finally upended society and overturned all of economy-based civilization, an abrupt change like the page of a book is turned.

Tyellen had trained on that picture among others. But Tyellen was weak in abstracts. And, suddenly, in cold fear, Whitesquare realized that there was another factor he'd forgotten. "Civilization" was such a great and famous picture and so often duplicated, in whole or in part, that the artifact itself was a legend.

What would a person do if he suddenly met Abraham Lincoln on the street? It would be hard to talk to Lincoln because instead of thinking about the man, the person would be tied up with all the associational reference material about Lincoln. You couldn't really see him for himself, only the shining greatness.

Here Tyellen was suddenly staring at the great original canvas with ancient old Claudel himself standing by to be judged. It awed the Critic. He couldn't hold his mind on the content of the picture. Whitesquare groaned and fiddled with the dials, but Tyellen had lost his critic's objectivity and

Whitesquare couldn't damp out all the neurotic "I" patterns. Whitesquare felt their beat. "Here I, Tyellen, humble lad of a humble home, sit on a great stage before the cream of American society, interpreting for them through my nervous system the greatest picture of our age."

A good critic suppressed the "I" identity all the way, so that the audience got pure feelings or emotions, an enormous range of delight, hate, fear, disgust, happiness and pleasure that can stir any mortal's mind.

The harder Tyellen tried to unthink his position and feel out the picture, the deeper in he got. Whitesquare remembered the statement of John Dewey, the philosopher: "Tell yourself not to think about something and that is the first step to thinking about it." There was a block the size of a skyscraper between Tyellen and his work.

Whitesquare sighed and signalled Cheryl. "Unwrap him, girl."

Cheryl slid with perfumed grace alongside Whitesquare. She snapped on the intercom switch and breathed a shocking suggestion to Tyellen over the system, putting all the femininity in her voice that she had, and she had lots.

The sudden interruption worked. Poor Tyellen was shocked and his mind fled from the female aggres-

sion. Whitesquare grinned. A good thing the audience didn't hear that! He'd bet the Referee's ears burned, though. Wonderful uninhibited Cheryl!

After that, Tyellen got back to work and did a pretty fair job. But he was still far, far too self-conscious. Whitesquare realized sadly that, instead of settling down, the boy was getting more and more nervous.

WATTS rejected "Civilization" and criticized the companion picture "Today." Claudel's concept of today's life, since the advent of the automatic factory, was also magnificent.

It began with the period of chaos, when men by the thousands were thrown out of work by automatic factories, and found old familiar ways of living, based on their jobs, completely up-ended. It showed the fantastic long vacations and short work-weeks, symbolized by the burning square of flesh at the beach, accompanied by burning psychic wounds as men realized that their days of usefulness in physical work were over.

A transition period. The realization everywhere that society had to find a new structure. In Art, of course. The science of emotion, frozen in pictures, ceramics, sculptures, architecture, writing, dancing, drama and music. All, all

emotion prepared for consumption, according to the abilities of the various artists.

Claudel had captured that on canvas with great economy and force. Watts swept that fullness off the canvas and transmitted it to his audience, unimpaired, Watts was like a great, flexible vessel, capable of holding any content and reflecting its goodness with sparkling clarity. The audience rode on his emotional responses as if surfing on a clean, foam-boiling sea and it was a terrific smash against Tyellen.

The Critics went on to some statues and tapestries, and Whitesquare ran up the power on Tyellen, but Watts held the lead easily; he had put down Tyellen and convinced him of his own emotional superiority and the bell rang, ending the quarter-finals.

The explosion was coming now, Whitesquare could see. Tyellen was too quiet, playing like a man unconscious as they unstrapped him from the chair and took him to the dressing room. But inside he seethed, Whitesquare knew. From the mishandling, the power stepped the slipped-in abstracts.

The problem now was—should he try to hold Tyellen back and soothe him, or prick the bubble and let the lava flow. The others were unaware of Tyellen's ominous state, babbling among them-

selves. Even Cheryl missed it—she seemed subdued now and sorrowful, no longer the cynic after Tyellen's poor beginning. She knew that those who had come closest to unseating Watts had checked him all the way to the finals before losing. Tyellen was far behind now at only the quarter-finals.

The trainers laid Tyellen on a matted table. He rested like a statue, his shallow chest rising and falling. Whitesquare ran his tongue over his dry lips, glancing at the Doc's medicine cabinet.

Well?

A promoter had only his instincts to guide him, and Whitesquare suddenly knew, deep inside, that it was time for Tyellen to crack. If he cracked now—anger. If he waited until he was back in the auditorium—hysteria.

Whitesquare walked up to Tyellen and stared down at him.

"You stank!" he said. Then he walked off.

There was a shocked silence. Tyellen, breathing hard, came up off the table.

"Leave me alone!"

Tyellen's thin body quivered, his eyes were alive and shining. The trainers who knew Tyellen as a retiring, shy introvert were astounded at his vehemence.

"You think I don't know what you're doing to me?" Tyellen asked Whitesquare, advancing on him.

"You don't care about me or the Judging. It's money. All over the city they say it. Whitesquare is through. Whitesquare owes thousands of dollars and he's got to get himself out of debt. Whitesquare lost his private museum, full of artistic junk that means prestige. He lost his stable of women—" Tyellen sneered, pointing at Cheryl—"like this one! He lost his big cars, and his lunches with rich culture manufacturers. You drank it all away—now you've got to have money, if it kills me!"

WHITESQUARE gave back before his attack, feeling his pulse throb. He held his own emotions tight, as he'd learned to do in the Ready Room. "Give with it, boy," he silently prayed.

"And you," said Tyellen scornfully to Cheryl. "You are to kiss me a few times and make me feel and save your six thousand dollars. Prostitute! Can that little spurt of erotic excitement win a match against a great Critic like Watts? No, you are the creature of Whitesquare — as corrupt as he is!"

Then he swung on the others.

"All of you," shouted Tyellen, the cords in his neck standing out. "All of you, like diseased flies hovering around the money-sugar of a great art Judging. Talking about the uplift of society from these skilled matches, but deep in

your hearts you hunger only for the money in it!"

Several tried to interrupt, and the psychiatrist moved towards him, but Whitesquare made an impatient gesture for them to let Tyellen run out.

"Those people out there," yelled Tyellen. "What do they care about Tyellen or art? Nothing, I tell you! Do you know why they are here? Their slimy little schemes today and yesterday failed. The artists failed to get raises from their bosses. The art foremen failed to get promoted. The housewives failed to get the new bust or picture for the living room that will make their home the envied one on the block. They must escape from the distress of their lives! Do you think they come to admire the great Watts and see the perfection of his performance? Wrong! They don't care for the winning. They come to see the failure—soothe their neurotic failures in the relentless poverty-struggle of their mental lives. They cannot feel even with a great Critic—but they can enjoy to see others fail. They come to watch Tyellen torn apart. Because to see a great failure makes their failure seem less. Fail, fail, fail! We have filled our lives with Art and the meaning of it and we are still lonely and greedy and failing . . ."

Tyellen had backed to the wall

as they all stared wordlessly at him. Great tears welled out of his eyes.

"And how did Tyellen become Critic?" he asked in self-pity. "I will say how. His mother discovered that her little Tyellen was clever with feelings. That he could make others see what he saw in pictures and music. Oh, she scraped and saved to send her little Tyellen to school! Great mother sacrifice! Tyellen went to school and got money on a Critic scholarship in so-called amateur Judgings, winning many contests for his college. And his mother was proud, for she now had a little money to enjoy and the neighbors came and told her how fine to see her son's name in print over and over.

"She arranged that Tyellen would meet a clever, attractive girl, ladies and gentlemen. Tyellen met and fell. Tyellen married and now he must go out on the circuits, the very lowest art circuits fighting in preliminary matches for a few dollars to feed his lovely girl wife and soon a child. How proud to tell your friends that husband is a professional Critic who lives entirely by judging emotion and does not have to create art like other men do for most of their lives!

"But you were not with me in the cheap hotel rooms in Albuquerque and Peoria and Little Falls and all the other places, the dirty, sordid places while I was learning

how to be professional.

"And always there were more matches because Tyellen could make them feel. 'Make me feel, Tyellen!' And their eyes get hot. They ride along my nervous system. Sometimes Tyellen is so empty from trying to feel so hard over some silly picture or tune that he vomits his supper and lays sleepless in the dark, like an early dead man, unable to recognize his demise."

Tyellen paused, red now, and almost exhausted. An usher appeared in the doorway. "Semi-final," he warned.

"Ah, Semi-final," whispered Tyellen, rocking on his feet. "So I sit again in your electric chair and die a little more to feed the failure-lovers and to please my backers' pocketbooks. For fifteen years I struggled and finally broke through to the top of my profession, and now I tell you in the final hour that I regret my life. I should've been a simple painter, doing still lives for some third-rate San Francisco Art company. I should've bought a little home and been always in debt and had many children instead of just one, and laughed happily at life with my neighbors. And do you know what I would do on Saturday nights, my friends? Yes! I would go to the Judgings like those cattle out there, and soothe my feelings of failure by watching a greater fail-

ure have his heart torn out. Bah, I spit on my profession!"

And Tyellen spit on the cement floor, rubbed it with his sandal and glared defiantly at them all.

"It's a shame," said Whitesquare quietly, "that you couldn't have saved all that for the ring, Tyellen. It took all of us a long time to get the money to put you there."

"I also spit on your fifty thousand," said Tyellen. He jerked the door open dramatically. "I shall go out there and show them. I shall prove that they are fools and worms. By all of the known gods, I will do this."

And he stalked haughtily out alone.

The others turned on Whitesquare to a man.

"You started it," shouted Atterbury. "Insulting him like that. How dare you—"

They poured it on. There was nothing to do but take it. Whitesquare stood there and took it, white-faced, feeling his insides squirm. Then at the sound of the warning bell they rushed like a pack of yapping dogs into the auditorium.

Whitesquare stood alone in the Ready Room for a moment, staring soberly at his mirror-reflection. He shook his head. Apparently his instincts were going back on him. To let Tyellen waste all that good, bubbling emotion in the Ready

Room! Whitesquare hurried out after the others, feeling like a man who has opened a door and stepped out into chaos.

THE audience knew instantly that something was wrong. The Judging had moved on to drama and dance now. Art Judgings were really of two kinds. Object art where a solitary Critic saw an object such as a painting or sculpture or tapestry—Human art where he watched other humans perform and these latter were the higher-regarded emotional materials, naturally. In object art, each Critic in turn took over the circuits to the audience. In human art, both Critics viewed the performance simultaneously. The audience, by tapping a button on their seats, could see it through the eyes of either Critic. At a given signal a count was made, with points going to the Critic who had the greatest following at the moment.

Whitesquare at his console could delete certain side-emotions and waste feelings, since the console filtered and amplified Tyellen's visual and aural impressions to the audience. But he could only delete. He could add nothing at all to the performance.

First Whitesquare listened in on his opponent, Watts, by tuning in his trainer's head-band. Watts moved smoothly with the perfor-

mance, seeing each part of it, hearing and realizing for his audience many, many things that the audience would not see itself. His keenly-trained mind doubled the value of the performance with associational references from his astoundingly versatile background. Tyellen, on the other hand, was turning the performance into a farce. "What do these people think they are doing?" his mind seemed to ask. "Fake situation from a past long dead! Real life humans strutting and panting about events so remote from their own true lives that it requires incredible suspension of belief to participate."

"Do we care about this salesman of the Twentieth Century? Do we care if this Willy Loman had a drab, depressing family and on business trips he indulged in erotic acts when safe? The world no longer has business to conduct; it is done by robots and nobody sells material goods any more, only art goods."

"True, the director has changed the play so that Willy Loman is now selling busts of Lincoln and paintings of Washington. True, the son who was footballing in the original, is now a young man who tries to become a Critic in the college arena, but has only a superficial talent for it."

"These changes do not help.

There is no identity."

The audience puzzled over Tyellen's failure to dig deeply into the performance and give them his feelings.

"You'd better look at that play again," said Whitesquare solemnly over the crackling intercom to Tyellen. "Here you have a man believing in the wrong things, forced on him by society and the needs of his family. Thinking that if he conformed to the externals of success, he would achieve success. Riding on a shoeshine and a smile. And at the end he fails, you know. Isn't that what you were just shooting your mouth off about? That all of your trainers, myself, your wife and your mother, that is, family and society, forced you to become a Critic for the money in it, so that we are all struggling for the outward appearance of success but there is really no health in us? That we are dead because we don't appreciate emotion for its true self? This is the story of *your* life, Tyellen, only we, the audience, are the deceived and you, the hero, the knowing, an inversion from the play where the hero is deceived and the audience is the knowing."

There came a shocked silence while Tyellen considered the proposition. Whitesquare saw him stir in his chair, his eyes glittering under the cowl helmet as he peered

carefully at the players.

Then, God help him, Tyellen identified as Whitesquare had seen few critics identify. It was like the sudden expansion of a great balloon. Imagine, thought Whitesquare, bathing the audience in pity, the weakest of all possible emotions! But Tyellen, caught by surprise, saw such a great parallel to his own life that he gave himself up to the play in a rush and even Whitesquare, used to the strong emotion of the ring, could feel the bitterness and world-wonder, and the healing tragedy of human life burn in his throat and mind and heart. Tyellen had gotten to the very bottom and opened the doors of the mind of every one of them and made them feel like children, joining him in the emotion he felt. The starved human who desired so much and failed so miserably, still with an awkward nobility, worthy of the respect not possible for the easy, successful hero.

Cheryl cried openly; a few more sensitive in the audience also wept. Whitesquare found himself blinking back tears.

The Referee took a reading. Of the twenty-five thousand in Madison Square Garden, Tyellen held twenty-three thousand, eight hundred—almost everybody but Watts and his crew and a few die-hards. And Tyellen held them.

Whitesquare had never seen

such points slapped on the scoreboard in a major Judging. It shot Tyellen ahead of Watts by a comfortable margin.

The judges made a signal and the play was stopped. There was no purpose in running it out when Watts could no longer overcome the lead.

"Semi-final to Tyellen. Total points: Tyellen 60, Watts 45."

THE trainers were jubilant as the group retired to the Ready Room with Tyellen. Atterbury danced with Sims. Maddington took his film of the Hopi Indian dance and threw it in the trash-barrel. Cheryl grinned happily, like a fool, the tears ruining her makeup.

But Whitesquare studied Tyellen. The Critic walked like an old man. Whitesquare sensed the inner conflict in Tyellen—the Judging was no longer a contest with Watts. Tyellen was forced to consider his own life and wonder about it, and ask himself, as every man must do, who he was and what he was doing there, working for the others. The head was sunk, the eyes dazed. Tyellen ignored them all, climbed on his table and lay like a corpse, drained of emotion, as he must have done on a thousand nights in cheap Ready Rooms when he was a prelim boy.

The match, Whitesquare sud-

denly knew, was over for Tyellen.

Stimulation. Whitesquare looked about the room desperately. But the doctors, the psychiatrists, the trainers—even Cheryl couldn't help much now. Tyellen needed strong medicine—some kind of encouragement that would carry him through. He had a commanding lead, if he could just slide to the finish.

Whitesquare slipped out of the room and went to Watts' dressing room, on the pretense of checking an option. When he came back, his face brimmed with an expression of hope. The crew still celebrated, talking in excited happiness. Tyellen still lay on his table, ignoring them—forgotten by them. They were already spending their profits.

An ugly shadow crossed Whitesquare's mind. Stimulation could be dangerous. He remembered the time he'd played a trick on Terramanagua, bringing an almost-forgotten girl friend into the Ready Room in the semi-final to dig more feeling out of his man. The trick had backfired. Terramanagua had frozen—not thawed. He'd lost that one.

But Whitesquare felt the old, tugging impatience to get inside Tyellen's skin and tear off the wrappings, like peeling onions.

"How is it, Tyellen?" he asked.

Tyellen raised his head, a yellow-white, and said in a dull voice: "I

can't go out there any more. The finals will be music, the most emotionally severe of all. It will tear me apart. They are going to play a Beethoven symphony and it will rip me in shreds. You must forfeit. It is over."

The hum in the room died to nothing. Only Whitesquare didn't look shocked. He applied his ammunition. "You should see Watts' Ready Room," he said. "They're going crazy. Watts has never been fifteen points down going into the finals since he was challenger years ago. They're all shouting at him and the psychiatrist is jabbing him full of needles, and the Doc is taking his temperature, and his manager is giving him hell."

The crew burst into a cheer. The dancing began all over again. But Tyellen quietly got up and faced them.

"How does Watts take this?" he asked.

Whitesquare hesitated. He was fishing now in the deep, deep waters of personality. He decided to give Tyellen the truth.

"He stares at them," said Whitesquare. "He just lays there on his table and stares at them."

"You see!" cried Tyellen, emotion returning with a rush. "It is *his* night to lose his soul, not mine. It is *his* failure that the carrion vultures have come to enjoy, to feed on the entrails of Watts."

Tyellen spread his hands. "I cannot allow this. Where is he? I will go to him. He and I will stand together against all of you. We will shake hands and be friends, and make it come out a tie, and walk away from you, laughing."

And he rushed out of the Ready Room.

"Great God," exploded Whitesquare. "Stop him! It's unheard of — a Critic to go to his opponents' dressing room during a match. The Commission — they'll scream to outer space!"

The entire crew pelted after the Critic, but Tyellen scooted through the murky archways and burst into the dressing room of Watts.

"I am Tyellen!" he shouted, and the whole room stood astounded and quiet as Tyellen's crew tumbled in behind him.

Tyellen walked up to Watts. "They will not destroy us, dear friend," he said.

Watts, from his table, raised his head. His doctor fell back in surprise. Closeup Watts looked very white and tired . . . almost stricken.

"Listen," Tyellen told him, "these people kill us for money. They will shuck the soul out of the body, just for money. And the people out there come for morbid reasons, to see us fail. To see us crack up with great passion exploded out of us."

He took Watts' hand in his thin

one.

"We are Critics. We are the feelers and judges in the culture-based society. It was said that the human race would be happy when it no longer had to struggle eight hours a day for a living. Instead it turned to culture and continued its neurotic fight for power and money in another arena. But we who feel the most are whole men! We are the leaders of mankind, not dogs, not their servants, to be destroyed in Judgings, cast aside when old!"

These was stunned wonder on Watts' face.

"Oh, we must be friends!" cried Tyellen. "Think of the horrors of the ex-Critics. Sobriquet, a wino on skid row, puking, in the garbage. Dessen in the madhouse. Water-price—I met him once—just a trainer with a permanent grin on his face, because he tried to feel too hard, once too often. Believe me, my friend, I won't hurt you any more!"

Watts struggled up to a sitting position.

"Hey!" said his manager.

"Quiet!" ordered Tyellen.

"Now, look—" began Whitesquare.

"Shut up!" snapped Tyellen.

Watts sat up and slung his legs over the side of the table. He gently disengaged his hand from Tyellen who smiled his friendliness.

"I've been World Champion for almost ten years," said Watts mildly. "I've traveled the world in Judgings, and nothing like this has ever happened to me before."

Tyellen bowed. "You and I will start a new day for Critics. Make it an honorable profession." His eyes swam with warmth and friendliness.

But Watts' blue eyes crackled. He bristled like a bulldog.

"All I can say to you," he yelled at Tyellen, "is GET OUT OF HERE, YOU CRAZY BASTARD!"

Poor Tyellen, thought Whitesquare, as they escorted him back to his dressing room. Once Tyellen stumbled, actually crying.

"They have doped him up. They have already taken away his mind. He is too far gone to see the light."

Whitesquare patted his shoulder. "Well, then it's up to you to go out there and see that those dogs don't destroy him," he said. "That's the bell for the finals."

Tyellen straightened and shook Whitesquare's hand free.

"Don't tell me what to do. Not ever again," he said with dignity. "I walk alone. I think alone. I am Tyellen!"

THE finals. The orchestra burst into sound. "There was a ballet, to be followed by the closing

symphony. Whitesquare, at the console, fiddled with the dials and lifted his eyes in surprise.

Nothing was coming out of Tyellen. Nothing at all. He was dead, like a turned-off lamp. He sat hunched in his chair, staring across the stage at Watts, hardly seeing the performance.

Watts began to roll up the points. 60 to 48. 60 to 54. At the end of the ballet it was 60 to 58. Watts was a sweating magnificence, holding the entire performance in his mind, not missing the thrill of the texture of the costumes, the moving-muscled beauty of the dancers and the aural splendor of the orchestra. He steeped his followers in a felt thing. Tyellen, on the other hand, gave out twinges of regret, bitterness, aching and longing. Not much positive stuff to hold his audience.

Whitesquare dropped his head on the panel board and groaned. Cheryl started to tear her handkerchief apart. Atterbury giggled a little hysterically, the rest were stunned.

In desperation Whitesquare gently reminded Tyellen that his opponent had called him an insulting name.

Tyellen firmly rejected this crude attempt to get emotion.

Then came the Symphony. A work that plumbed the heights and depths of human emotions. Watts

was like a majestic yacht, riding the surface, moving easily with the ground swells and going down with sudden lurches into the excitement of raging seas when the music thundered. Watts, you could tell, was horribly tired, but he was investing every brain-cell in staying with the music.

Tyellen stirred. Emotion began to flow in his mind. With a throb of hope, Whitesquare amplified it up. There was a stirring throughout the crowd as they felt the faint return of Tyellen to the battle. They had not understood his giving up the ballet to Watts without a struggle. They were curious.

At the quarter final, Tyellen had made his greatest revolt and walked away from mankind. At the semi he had tried to change mankind when he had made the offer of a truce to Watts.

Now Tyellen began a new phase. He started to tell the story of his life, pacing the music. They were all a poor, little poverty-stricken Chinese lad in a San Francisco tenement. They struggled with him as he found his gift and began to use it. They enjoyed with him the first beginnings of his prosperity, the fruits of which he yielded to his wife and mother whom, he suspected used him woefully.

They felt the burn and ache of his life in the provincial judgments that were the start of his career. The

misery and emptiness of having all feeling pumped out of a tender, sensitive mind, night after night. No respite, little hope, a doubtful future. And then suddenly, Tyellen turned a corner, and after that it got easier—he was a craftsman and finally at the age of thirty-one, the great challenger.

THEN at the critical moment of his career, he turned on it in hate, and he tried to give it up and walk away from it. He tried to regain his identity and be a whole man above his art and his profession.

Too late the fly discovers that the web cannot be broken.

Beat, beat, beat, the music.

Too soon the cement-pattern of life hardens and the person finds he has been created by his environment.

Beat, beat, beat, the music.

Too often the hopes of gain in men run ahead, skittering down the well-worn road on girl-curved legs, drawing the eye and mind and soul away from peace.

Beat, beat, beat.

And this I say to you. You were a whole person before you were born and in death you will be a whole person again. But in the middle, during the life movement, you are a tortured fragment, created by the pressure of the other people, and tradition and situations. No one

walks away from it, not presidents, or dictators, or janitors. Not bums, nor the insane who pray only to leave the walls of solitude we often desire. No man can long make a greater or lesser thing of life than it is, not for long. Every man is most alone when he is with the others with their alien pressures on him. Every man is most committed when he is alone and dreams and sighs and feels as all men feel. Do not accept your fate. Face it and struggle with it. Do not hate your fate too much, but give way before it, when you find that everybody reads you wrong. Keep accepting, yet struggling as long as possible, because no man can walk away from the bitter wonder of life.

Beat, beat, beat—and out.

The music ended, the Judging ended and the audience sat breathless in silence, all held in the slim, yellow hand of the great new Critic. Watts rose from his chair but none paid any attention.

Then Tyellen stood and said: "Man cannot conclude—he only feels."

Released, the audience burst into an ovation. But with dignity, ignoring them, the new World Champion took off his cowl plate and walked from the auditorium without even looking at the scoreboard, nor at his opponent who had slid into a faint of exhaustion and was carried out—

The trainers fizzed happily again. Cheryl leaned on Whitesquare's shoulders, crying and muzzling him. "Let's get a bottle. A great big bottle. And get drunk as hell!"

But Whitesquare shoved her away. Was it possible that after a tiny moment of comprehension they couldn't hold it in their minds? None of them?

He looked at the audience, stirring, smiling at each other, returning to reality, already forgetting.

From that night only Tyellen had learned. Only Tyellen?

Whitesquare went quietly to the Ready Room and got his coat. Tyellen was in the showers. Whitesquare didn't trust himself to speak to him. Whitesquare went out on the cold, wintery streets, alone.

It was a wonderful night, with fat, twinkling stars, cheerful lights, happy, excited people in the streets. He walked up Broadway tears shining in his eyes. He passed a liquor store without looking at it. He was whole again, and sane. There were wonderful years ahead.

A great Critic could do that for a great Promoter.

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *Raymond A. Palmer* ★

(Continued from page 2)

science fiction, which makes him a bloodless relative.)

"You've actually written six million words? But why?"

"I buy your magazines for the editorials."

"So you were born in 1910 (August 1, for those who wish to send birthday presents)? And you got run over by a truck at the age of seven? Well, seven is the age of reason, they say, and I can see the idea the truck driver had in mind. He must have been psychic! Should have a medal—no, he should be hanged by the neck for failing!"

"You edited how many magazines? Let's see: *Amazing Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, *Air Adventures*, *South Sea Stories*, *Mammoth Western*, *Mammoth Mystery*, *Mammoth Detective*, *Mammoth Adventure*, *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, *Fantastic Adventures Quarterly*, *Fate*, *Mystic*, *Science Stories*, *Other Worlds*, *Universe*. And you published the following books: *Dawn of Flame* (Weinbaum Memorial Volume), *The Coming of the Saucers*, *The Secret of the Saucers*. You were one of the editors of the first sf fan magazine. Quite a record!"

(Concluded on page 131)

Obtaining an appointment with the Colonial Minister on Earth was no easy task for an alien visitor. Unless, like Kalainnen, one became a—

Yokel With Portfolio

by

Bob Silverberg

IT was just one of those coincidences that brought Kalainnen to Terra the very week that the bruug escaped from the New York Zoo. Since Kalainnen was the first Traskan to come to Terra in over a century, and since the bruug had lived peacefully in the zoo for all of the three or four hundred years or more since it had been brought there from outer space, the odds were greatly against the two events coinciding. But they did.

Kalainnen, never having been on a world more complex than the agrarian backwater of civilization that was his native planet Trask, was considerably astonished at his first sight of the gleaming towers of New York, and stood open-mouthed at the landing depot, battered suitcase in hand, while the other passengers from his ship flocked past him to waiting

friends and relatives. In a very short time the depot was cleared, except for Kalainnen and a tall young Terran who had been waiting for someone, and who seemed evidently troubled.

He walked up to Kalainnen. "I'm from the *Globe*," the young man said, looking down at him. "I was told there was an alien from Trask coming in on this ship, and I'm here to interview him. Sort of a feature angle — weird monster from a planet no one knows very much about. Know where I can find him?"

The young Terran's hair was long and green. Kalainnen felt acutely aware of his own close-cropped, undyed hair. No one had warned him about Terran fashions, and he was beginning to realize that he was going to be terribly out of style here.

"I am from Trask," Kalainnen



said. "Can I help you?"

"Are you the one who came in just now? Impossible!"

Kalainnen frowned. "I assure you, sir, I am. I just arrived this

very minute, from Trask."

"But you look perfectly ordinary," said the reporter, consulting some scribbled notes. "I was told that Traskans were reptiles, sort of

like dinosaurs but smaller. Are you *sure* you're from Trask? Procyon IV, that is."

"So that's it," Kalainen said. "You're mistaken, young man. The inhabitants of Procyon IV are reptiles, all right — in more ways than one. But that's Quange. Trask is Procyon V. I'm of Terran descent; the Traskans are not aliens but colonists from Terra. We were settled in —"

"That doesn't matter," said the reporter, closing his notebook. "No news in you. Reptiles would be different. Hope you enjoy your stay."

He walked away, leaving Kalainen alone in the depot. It had not been exactly a promising introduction to Terra, so far. And he hadn't even had a chance to ask for anything yet.

He checked out of the depot, passed through customs without much difficulty (the only problem was explaining where and what Trask was; the planet wasn't listed in the Registry any more) and headed out into the busy street.

It made him sick.

There were shining autos buzzing by, and slick little copters, and hordes of tall people in plastic tunics, their hair dyed in fanciful colors, heading for unknown destinations at awesome speed. The pavement was a deep golden-

red, while the buildings radiated soft bluish tones. It was not at all like Trask, quiet, peaceful Trask. For an unhappy moment Kalainen wondered whether the best thing for Trask would not be for him to turn around and take the next liner back; did he really want to turn it into another Terra? But no: the technology of Trask had fallen centuries behind that of the rest of the galaxy's, and he had come for aid. Trask had been virtually forgotten by Terra and was stagnating, off in its corner of the sky. Kalainen's mission was vital to Trask's continued existence.

BEFORE he left they had dressed him in what they thought were the latest Terran styles and cropped his hair in approved fashion. But, as he walked through the crowded streets of the metropolis, it became more and more apparent that they were centuries behind in dress, as well. He was hopelessly out of date.

"Yokell!" called a high, childish voice. "Look at the Yokel!" Kalainen glanced up and saw a small boy pointing at him and giggling. A woman with him — his mother, probably — seized him roughly by the wrist and pulled him along, telling him to hush. But Kalainen could see on her face a surreptitious smile, as if she agreed with the boy's derision.

The rest of the walk was a nightmare of snickers and open laughs. Even the occasional alien he saw seemed to be sneering at him. Kalainnen trudged along, feeling horribly short and dumpy-looking, regretting his old-fashioned clothes and close-cut hair and battered suitcase, and regretting the whole foolish journey. Finally he found the address he was heading for — a hotel for transient aliens — and checked in.

The hotel had facilities for all sorts of monstrosities, but, since Trask was an Earth-type planet, he accepted one of the ordinary rooms, and sank gratefully down on a pneumochair.

"Hello," said the chair. "Welcome to Terra."

Kalainnen leaped up in fright and looked around the room. There was no one else present. Probably some sort of advertising stunt, he concluded. Piped in from above. He sat down again in relief.

"Hello," said the chair. "Welcome to Terra."

He frowned. How often were they going to welcome him? He looked around the room for the loud-speaker, hoping to find it and rip it out. There was no sign of one. He sat down again.

"Hello," the chair said a third time. "Welcome to Terra."

"So that's it!" Kalainnen said,

looking at the chair. He wondered if every chair in the hotel spoke to its extra-terrestrial occupant, and, if so, how long the occupants could stand it.

Pressing gingerly on the seat of the pneumochair revealed that the voice was activated by weight. He dropped his suitcase heavily on the chair, ignoring the fourth welcome, and sat carefully on the edge of the bed, waiting for chimes or some other sign of welcome. Nothing was forthcoming. He leaned back, and rested.

Tomorrow he would have to try to get an audience with the Colonial Minister, in hopes of arranging some sort of technical-assistance program for Trask. But now, he thought, as he swung his legs up and got under the covers, the first thing was to get some sleep. Terra was a cold and unfriendly world, and his appearance was not calculated to win him any friends. He would rest. The bed was much too soft, and he longed for the simple life on Trask.

Just as he began to drop off into sleep, a sudden and powerful buzzing noise jolted him out of bed.

Astonished, he looked around, wondering what the buzzing meant. It was repeated, and this time he realized it was a signal that someone was at the door. A

visitor, so soon? There were no other Traskans on Terra; of that, he was fairly certain.

After a moment's confusion with the photo-electric device that controlled the door, he got it open. The green, reptilian face of a Quangen stared blandly up at him.

"OH," the Quangen said. "They told me someone was here from the Procyon system, and I was sort of hoping —"

"Yes," said Kalainnen. "I know. You were hoping I was from your planet, not mine. Sorry to disappoint you. Anything else I can do for you?" He stared at the Quangen coldly. Little love was lost between their neighboring worlds.

"You needn't be so inhospitable, friend," said the Quangen. "Our people are not the best of friends at home, but we're almost brothers this far from Procyon."

The Quangen was right, Kalainnen conceded to himself. Poor company was better than none at all, anyway.

"You're right. Come on in," he said. The Quangen nodded his head—his equivalent of a smile—and stomped in, flicking his tail agilely over his shoulder to prevent it from being caught in the door.

"What brings you to Terra?" said the Quangen.

"I might ask the same of you,"

Kalainnen said.

"You can, if you want to," said the reptile. "Look fellow: I told you before, maybe our planets don't get along too well, but that's no reason why *we* shouldn't. I see no harm in telling you that I'm here on a technical-aid mission. It's about time Quange caught up with the rest of the galaxy. I'll bet that's why you're here, too."

Kalainnen debated for a moment and then decided there was no reason why he shouldn't admit it.

"You're right," he said. "I have an appointment with the Colonial Minister for tomorrow." It wasn't quite the truth — he was only going to *try* to get an appointment the next day — but he saw no reason why the Quangen should know this.

"Oh, you do, eh?" said the Quangen, twirling the prehensile tip of his tail around his throat in an expression of, Kalainnen knew, amusement. "That's very interesting. I've been waiting two years and I haven't even come close to him. How do you rate such quick service?" He looked meaningfully at Kalainnen, flicking his tail from side to side.

"Well," said Kalainnen, nearly sitting down in the chair and avoiding it at the last moment, "well —"

"I know," said the Quangen. "You can't help being a Traskan,

even on Terra. I'll forgive you. But you don't really have an appointment tomorrow, do you?"

"No," Kalainnen said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't even applied yet. I just got here."

"I thought so," the reptile said. "In two years I've gotten as far as the First Assistant Undersecretary. The Colonial Minister is a very busy man, and there are more out-world planets than you can imagine. I've been living here. The hotel's full of outworlders like us who are stuck here waiting to see some bureaucrat or other. I'll introduce you around tomorrow. After two years it's good to see someone from the same system."

Kalainnen frowned. They hadn't told him the mission might go on and on for a matter of years. As it was, a single afternoon on Terra had been a profoundly distressing experience. And two years?

"By the way," the Quangen said. "There's one little feature of the furniture here that must be bothering you. We more experienced hands know how to circumvent it." He extended his tail under the seat of the pneumochair, explored the insides of the chair for a moment, and then pulled his tail out quickly. An abortive "Hello, welcome to —" started out of the chair and died.

"Sit down," the Quangen said. Kalainnen did. The chair was

silent.

"Thank you," Kalainnen said. "The chair was bothering me."

"It won't any longer," said the Quangen. "I'm Hork Frandel, by the way."

"My name's Kalainnen," Kalainnen said. He stared glumly out the window. "What's that box over there?" he said.

"The video," Frandel explained. "Put a quarter in the slot and it plays. It's entertaining, but it's one aspect of Terran technology I'd just as soon not bring back to Quange. You may like it, of course."

"I don't have any coins," Kalainnen said. "All I have is Galactic Traveller's Checks."

"Allow me," said the Quangen. He reached into his upper hip pocket with his tail and withdrew a small coin, which he inserted in the appropriate slot. The video flickered and came to life.

"The big news of the day!" said a deep, robust voice, and the screen showed a fleeing multitude. "All New York is in terror today. For the first time in over a century, a dangerous alien beast has escaped from New York's famed Zoological Gardens and is roaming the city." The camera showed a deserted cage.

The scene cut to a very scientific-looking office and the camera focused on a dapper man with

an extravagant mustache. "I'm Carlson," he said, "head of the zoo. We're unable to account for the escape. The animal lived here peacefully for centuries. It's something like an ape, something like a tiger. Eats anything. Completely indestructible, perhaps immortal, hitherto quite docile though frightening looking. Skin like stone, but flexible. Origin is somewhere on one of the smaller outworlds; unfortunately our records have been misfiled and we're not sure exactly where the animal comes from. My guess is Rigel II, possibly Alpheraz VI." He smiled, doing impossible things with his mustache, and radiating an aura of complete confidence.

"We're taking all possible steps for the beast's recapture; meantime DO NOT PANIC, but avoid unnecessary going out."

Kalainnen looked at the Quangen, who looked back balefully.

"Things like this happen all the time?" Kalainnen asked.

"Not too often," Frandel said. He looked boredly at the screen, which was showing shots of some incomprehensible sporting event, apparently having lost interest in the escaped animal. He glanced at his watch — Kalainnen noted how incongruous the Terran-type watch seemed against the Quangen's scaly skin — and got up.

"I've got to be moving on," he

said. "But maybe I'll see you at the Colonial Ministry tomorrow, if it's safe to go out. I've got an appointment to ask for an appointment." The Quangen grinned, waved his tail in salute, and left.

KALAINNEN watched the video until the time Frandel had bought for him expired. The camera had gone to another office, the mayor's and he was discussing the situation. The plans being concocted for capture of the beast were growing more and more elaborate as the minutes went on; the animal had taken up headquarters in an office building (hastily evacuated) and Terran police had established a cordon around the building, with heavy artillery trained on the entrance waiting for the animal to appear. Kalainnen wondered what the point of using artillery on an indestructible beast was, but the mayor did not dwell on the point.

Suggestions offered by various authorities over the video included flooding the building with radiation, building a steel wall around the edifice, and bombing the whole area. Erecting the wall seemed the only solution of any value, but there was always the consideration that the hungry animal might appear before the wall was finished, causing all sorts of difficulties. Kalainnen had no

coins, and so he climbed into the too-soft bed and, after a while, fell asleep, pondering the state of affairs.

The next morning he went down to the Colonial Ministry. Since the animal was, at least in theory, under control, people were going about business as usual, but they were moving quickly and cautiously through the streets as if they expected to be devoured at any instant.

It was not difficult to find the Ministry — it was one of the biggest of a great many immense buildings. But it was crowded. There were colonist of all shapes and sizes pleading their various cases. Lines of outworlders extended in all directions — humans, humanoids, and grotesque total-aliens wearing protective devices of great complexity. Besides those in line, many more milled around aimlessly, apparently too confused and too deafened by the enormous hubbub to do anything else. Kalainnen could see now why the Quangen had got no farther than a First Assistant Undersecretary in two years.

"Where is this line heading?" he asked a tall purple beanpole, probably hailing from an inner world of Arcturus.

"I don't know," the beanpole said. "But it seems to be a short one."

A cucumber-like alien from a planet Kalainnen didn't know turned around and said, "Just got here? Try that line over there." Kalainnen followed where the stubby tentacle pointed, and joined the other line, which seemed to stretch off endlessly. The new line seemed to be composed almost exclusively of humans and humoids; occasionally a small dog-like being ran up and down the line, laughing wildly. In two hours the line moved seven feet. By late afternoon the line had unaccountably moved back until it was almost four feet behind where Kalainnen had joined it. Sensing there was no point in waiting any longer, since he still had not been able to find out what line he was on (not that it seemed to matter) and he had not been able to get anywhere in particular, he left, completely discouraged.

The Quangen, he knew, was a slick, shrewd operator — it was a characteristic of the race — and yet even he had failed to reach any appreciable proximity to the Colonial Minister. What chance, then, did he, Kalainnen, a visiting yokel from a backwater planet, have?

It didn't look as if Trask were going to get the technological assistance it needed, he thought — not if every day was like this one. In a way it wasn't so bad — Trask

seemed to get along all right on tools five centuries out of date — but he would feel terribly unhappy about returning empty-handed. The whole planet had contributed to pay his passage, and he had been hailed as the savior of Trask. He had been a hero there; here he was just a stubby little man of no particular importance.

He walked all the way back to the hotel, feeling dismal. Everyone he passed seemed to be discussing the monster at loose in the city, and he found himself wishing devoutly that the animal would eat them all, slowly.

“GET anywhere?” asked Frandel that evening.

Kalainnen shook his head.

“That’s too bad,” the Quangen said soothingly. “It took me a month to get my petition received, though, so don’t worry too much. It’s just a matter of going there regularly, and getting there before everyone else.”

“What time does it open?” Kalainnen asked, too weary to look up.

“About 0800, I think. But you’ll have to get there about midnight the night before to make any headway. In fact, you’d be wise to start out right now and wait in line till it opens. You might be one of the first.”

“Leave now? Stand in line all

night?”

“You don’t like the idea?” The Quangen grinned toothily. “Unfortunately. But you’re likely to disappoint all the folks back on Trask unless you do it. I didn’t enjoy it, either. Oh, by the way — I moved up a notch today. My application is now up to the Second Assistant Under-Secretary, and I might get to the First Associate in a couple of weeks. I should be bringing quite a load of valuable data back to Quange before long. In fact, there’s a very good chance that we’ll be leaving Trask far, far behind.” He curled his tail derisively.

That’s all we need, Kalainnen thought. He waved his hand feebly. “Congratulations. Fine. Leave me alone, will you?”

The Quangen bowed, grinned, and left.

Kalainnen stared at the video set for a long time after the reptile’s departure. The Quangen certainly was a slick operator. It might be ten years before Kalainnen got close to the Colonial Minister. Even for as slow-moving a planet as Trask, ten years was a long time. They might think he was dead.

He played with the handful of coins he had accumulated during the day and finally dropped one in the video. He stared glumly as the set came to life.

"New York remains paralyzed by the unknown alien monster in its midst," a staccato voice said. "The animal is still somewhere in the building in the heart of the business district that it took over late yesterday, and a fearsome range of artillery is waiting for it to emerge. *Do not panic.* The situation is under study by our foremost experts on extra-terrestrial life.

"And now, for the first time, we can show you what this monster looks like. Zoo officials have supplied a photograph of the animal." The photograph appeared on the screen. Kalainen reached to turn off the set, then stopped as the features of the beast behind the bars registered.

It was a bruug.

He sat back in his chair, startled. His first thought was one of incredulity. The whole city terrorized by a bruug. They were the most peaceful, the most —

Then he thought of calling the video station. They would be interested in learning the identity of the monster, the planet it came from, all the data that the zoo officials had misplaced or (more likely) forgotten.

Then he realized he was the ace in the hole.

At the rate he was going, he would never come to the Terrans' notice, and, just as Trask was a

forgotten backwater of the Galaxy, he would remain in this hotel, forgotten by Terra and, eventually, by Trask.

But there was one thing he could do. He was of vital importance to Terra, though they didn't realize it. The bruug, the familiar red beast, was virtually a domestic animal on Trask; every Traskan could handle one like a pet. It was all a matter of understanding animals, and this the Traskans did superbly. No bomb would do any good — not on an animal with a hide like that. No; it was understanding. A few gentle words from a Traskan and the animal would lie down placidly. Understanding.

And who understood the bruug? Kalainen. His way seemed perfectly clear to him.

Of course, the bruug might not be red. It might be blue. The only way he could tell was by close examination. And if the bruug were blue — but he preferred not to think about that.

Anyway, it would be good to see something from home again.

THE streets were deserted. No Terran cared to venture out into the night while the bruug was loose in the city, no matter how many guns were trained on it. The spectacle of an immense city completely terrorized by an

animal of which he himself had no more fear than of a butterfly amused Kalainnen as he walked down to the building where the bruug was.

It was a long walk, but the city was intelligently planned and he had no trouble finding his way. He enjoyed the walk; the air was clean and fresh at night, almost like Trask, and there were no people in the streets to snicker at him.

Finally, in the distance, he glimpsed some big guns and a group of soldiers. He began to trot a little. When he reached the guns, the soldiers stopped him.

"What do you want?" said a very tall man in a very resplendent uniform. In the dim light Kalainnen saw that his hair was dyed a flaming bronze-red. "Are you crazy, walking right in here?"

"I'm from Trask," Kalainnen said. "We know how to handle these animals. Let me through, please." He started to walk on.

"Just a minute!" The big soldier grabbed him; Kalainnen twisted loose. Two other soldiers dove for him and caught him, and he found himself looking up at an even taller and more resplendent one.

"This guy says he's from Trask, Sir," the first soldier said. "Says he knows how to handle the animal."

"That's right," Kalainnen said.

"They're domestic animals on Trask."

The officer looked at him — he was more than a foot taller than Kalainnen — and laughed. "Domestic animal, eh? Pet for the kiddies? Take him away — anywhere, just out of my sight."

As the first soldier reached for Kalainnen, a mighty roar erupted from the office building. Kalainnen felt a thrill of familiarity; knowing there was a bruug in the vicinity — even a blue one — was a comforting feeling.

"*All hands to battle stations!*" the officer roared. "Prepare to fire!"

The bruug roared again, from somewhere inside the building. The soldiers dashed to the gun installations, and suddenly Kalainnen found himself standing alone and ignored. He looked briefly around and began to run as fast as he could for the entrance to the building, ignoring the outraged and amazed yells of the soldiers who watched him.

THE building was unlighted and very big. Kalainnen wandered around in the dark for a moment or two, hoping the bruug would not appear before he had acclimated his vision to the darkness. From somewhere on an upper floor, he heard the deep-throated roar he knew so well. The poor beast was

hungry.

Bruugs were docile animals. But the blue bruugs of Kadarth the deserted island in South Trask, were hardly so. And they refused to be understood.

As he wandered through the darkened building, he began to wonder whether or not he was biting off more than he was going to get down his throat. If the bruug were blue, well, that was it. But even if it were the domesticated kind, it had, after all, been captured (or, more likely, given away by the Traskans) centuries before. Perhaps it had forgotten.

The roaring grew louder. Kalainnen mounted the stairs.

It was dark, but he was growing accustomed to the darkness and could see fairly well. Not well enough to discern the color of the bruug's skin at a distance, though; he would have to look under the thick fur, and by the time he got that close it no longer mattered much.

On the fourth floor he came across the bruug, sprawled out in the corridor and munching angrily on a splintered door. The bruug was a big one; he had prospered in captivity. He scented Kalainnen and looked up slowly at him and emitted a great roar.

"Hello," Kalainnen said, looking at the beast's eyes. As it began to lumber to its feet, Kalainnen

walked toward it, smiling, trying desperately not to let his fear show through and destroy his chances of mastering the animal. The roars of the bruug filled the hall. Kalainnen began to talk to it, calmly, in Traskan.

It rose to its full height and began to charge.

"No. You don't want to do that at all," Kalainnen said, listening to the echoes of his voice rattling down the corridor. "You don't want to do that."

Ten minutes later he emerged from the building, with the bruug following docilely behind.

It had been a red one.

THE Colonial Minister was a jovial-looking rotund man, one of the few unimpressive-looking Terrans Kalainnen had ever seen. Kalainnen studied his features for a moment or two, and then looked down again at the text of the agreement whereby Terra would supply the planet Trask with a team of technologists and whatever aid would be necessary, in return for valuable services rendered by an inhabitant of the aforementioned planet Trask, etc., etc.

"It sounds reasonable enough," Kalainnen said. "I think it'll meet our needs admirably."

"I'm pleased to hear that, Mr. Kalainnen," the Colonial Minister said. "But I still don't under-

stand a planet whose people have such skills as you showed can need any help from us."

"It's a matter of different kinds of skills, Mr. Minister," Kalainen said. "Every planet understands certain things that no other one does. Once in a book of Terran folklore — we have a few old Terran books on Trask — I read a story that reminds me of this. It seems a backwoodsman came to a big city, and, amid the roaring of traffic, said he heard a cricket chirping. They laughed at him, but he walked down a street and pointed out a nearby sewer opening and sure enough, they found a little cricket in the opening. Everyone congratulated him for his miraculous powers of hearing. But he proved that he didn't hear better than anyone else, just that he heard different things."

"How did he do that?" the Minister murmured.

"It was easy. He took a small coin out of his pocket and dropped it on the sidewalk. Two hundred people stopped and looked around at the sound."

The Minister smiled. Kalainen knew from experience that he was a busy man, but at the moment he had the upper hand and he wanted

to make the most of it.

"The moral of the story is, sir, that some planets are good for one thing and some for another. And so if you'll give us the tools we need, we'll show you why ferocious monsters on Terra are pleasant pets on Trask. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," said the Minister. He extended his pen to Kalainen, who signed the agreement with a flourish.

On his way out of the Ministry he passed Frandel, who was standing gloomily in the midst of a seemingly endless line.

"Let's get together again some time," Kalainen said, pausing for a moment. The Quangen just glared at him angrily. "Let me know when you get back to our system, old man. Perhaps you'd like to come over to Trask and study our technology." Kalainen smiled. "Best of luck, friend. The Minister is a fine man; you'll see that as soon as you get to see him. *If* you get to see him, that is."

And Kalainen walked on, feeling very pleasant, and — unintentionally, of course — treading on the tip of the Quangen's prehensile tail, which he had wanted to do all his life.

THE END

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Immortal Steel



RECENT studies in the science of crystallography have disclosed some interesting facts in connection with metals, facts which promise to change completely the art of metallurgy. Tiny crystals of metals exhibit amazing properties when examined by themselves and not as the part of a larger structure. A single crystal will be incredibly hard and strong. It will have a tensile strength far beyond that of the hardest and strongest steels. Steel crystals will show similar properties.

This means that theoretically there is no reason at all why metals should not be infinitely stronger than they are. It is known that the nuclear binding forces in a crystal are tremendous. Why then are not the metals as a whole of gigantic strength? As yet the answer is not known but hope exists that it can be found.

We can look to the day when we will have steel or aluminum beams *thousands* of times stronger than the present ones. The world is due for some metallurgical surprises!



"Jenkins, what say we don't report your navigational error!"

We hope the Medical profession won't take offense with this story — but when you get right down to it, maybe Wheatley received more than—

An Ounce Of Cure

by

Alan E. Nourse

THE doctor's office was shiny and modern. Behind the desk the doctor smiled down at James Wheatley through thick glasses.

Wheatley had been palpitating for five days straight at the prospect of coming here. Now he said, "Doctor, I've been having a pain in my toe."

"Indeed!" said the doctor. "Well, now! How long have you had this pain, my man?"

"About six months, I'd say. Just now and then, you know — it's never really been bad. Until last week. You see —"

"I see," said the doctor. "Getting worse all the time, you say."

Wheatley wiggled the painful toe reflectively. "Well — you might say that. You see, when I first—"

"How old did you say you were, Mr. Wheatley?"

"Fifty-five."

"Fifty-five!" The doctor leafed through the medical record on his desk, "But this is incredible. You haven't had a checkup in over twenty years!"

"I guess I haven't," said Wheatley, apologetically. "I'd been feeling pretty well until —"

"Feeling well!" The doctor stared at him. "But my dear fellow, no checkup since January 1955! We aren't in the middle ages now, you know. This is 1972."

"Well, of course —"

"Of course you may be *feeling* well enough—but that doesn't mean everything is just the way it should be. And now, you see, you're having pains in your toes!"

"One toe," said Wheatley. "The little one on the right. It seemed to me—"

"One toe *today*, perhaps," said the doctor heavily. "But *tomorrow*

—” He heaved a sigh. “How about your breathing lately? Been growing short of breath when you hurry upstairs?”

“Well — I *have* been bothered a little—”

“I thought so! Heart pound when you run for the subway? Feel tired all day? Pains in your calves when you walk fast?”

“Uh—yes, occasionally, I —” Wheatley looked worried and rubbed his toe on the chair leg.

“Fifty-five can be a dangerous age,” said the doctor gravely. “Do you have a cough? Heartburn after dinner? Prop up on pillows at night? Just as I thought! And no checkup for twenty years!” He sighed again.

“I suppose I should have seen to it,” Wheatley admitted. “But you see, it’s just that my toe—”

“My dear fellow! Your toe is *part* of you. It doesn’t just exist down there all by itself. If your *toe* hurts, there must be a *reason*.”

Wheatley looked more worried than ever. “There must? I thought — perhaps you could just give me a little something —”

“To stop the pain?” The doctor looked shocked. “Well, of course I could *do* that — but that’s not getting to the root of the trouble, is it? That’s just treating symptoms. Medieval quackery. Medicine has advanced tremendously since your last checkup, my friend. And even

treatment has its danger — did you know that more people died last year of *aspirin* poisoning than of *cyanide* poisoning?”

Wheatley wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. “I—dear me! I never realized —”

“We have to *think* about those things,” said the doctor. “Now, the problem here is to find out *why* you have the pain. It could be inflammatory. Maybe a tumor. Perhaps it could be, uh, functional . . . or maybe vascular!”

“Perhaps you could take my blood pressure, or something,” Wheatley offered.

“Well, of course I *could*. But that isn’t really my field, you know. It wouldn’t really *mean* anything, if I did it. But there’s nothing to worry about. We have a fine Hypertensive man at the Diagnostic Clinic.” The doctor checked the appointment book on his desk. “Now if we could see you there next Monday morning at nine—”

“**V**ERY interesting X-rays,” said the young doctor with the red hair. “*Very* interesting. See this shadow in the duodenal cap? See the prolonged emptying time? And I’ve never seen such a beautiful spastic pylorus!”

“This is my toe?” asked Wheatley, edging toward the doctors. It seemed he had been waiting for a very long time.

"Toe! Oh, no," said the red-headed doctor. "No, that's the Orthopedic Radiologist's job. I'm a Gastro-Intestinal man, myself. Upper. Dr. Schultz here is Lower." The red-headed doctor turned back to his consultation with Dr. Schultz. Mr. Wheatley rubbed his toe and waited.

Presently another doctor came by. He looked very grave as he sat down beside Wheatley. "Tell me, Mr. Wheatley — have you had an orthodiagram recently?"

"No—"

"An EKG?"

"No."

"Fluoroaortogram?"

"I—don't *think* so—"

The doctor looked even graver, and walked away, muttering to himself. In a few moments he came back with two more doctors. "—no question in *my* mind that it's cardiomegaly," he was saying, "but Haddonfield should know. He's the best Left Ventricle man in the city. Excellent paper in the AMA last July — he called it 'The Inadequacies of Modern Orthodiagramatic Techniques in Demonstrating Minimal Left Ventricular Hypertrophy.' A brilliant study, simply brilliant! Now *this* patient —" He glanced toward Wheatley, and his voice dropped to a mumble.

Presently two of the men nodded, and one walked over to Wheatley,

cautiously, as though afraid he might suddenly vanish. "Now, there's nothing to be alarmed about, Mr. Wheatley," he said. "We're going to have you fixed up in just no time at all. Just a few more studies. Now, if you could see me in Valvular Clinic tomorrow afternoon at three—"

Wheatley nodded. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Serious? Oh, No! Dear me, you *mustn't* worry. Everything is going to be all right," the doctor said.

"Well— I— that is, my toe is still bothering me some—it's not nearly as bad as it *was* you understand, but I wondered if maybe you—"

Dawn broke on the doctor's face. "Give you something for it? Well now, we aren't Therapeutic men, you understand. Always best to let the expert handle the problem in his own field—" He paused, stroking his chin for a moment. "Tell you what we'll do. Dr. Epstein is one of the finest Therapeutic men in the city. He could take care of you in a jiffy. We'll see if we can't arrange an appointment with him after you've seen me tomorrow—"

MR. Wheatley was late to Mitral Valve Clinic the next day because he had gone to Aortic Valve Clinic by mistake, but finally he found the right waiting room. A

few hours later he was being thumped, photographed, and listened to. Substances were popped into his right arm, and withdrawn from his left arm as he marveled at the brilliance of modern medical techniques. Before they were finished he had been seen by both the Mitral men and the Aortic men, as well as the Great Arteries man and the Peripheral Capillary Bed man.

The Therapeutic man happened to be in Atlantic City at a convention, so Wheatley was sent to Functional Clinic instead. The Psychoneuroticist studied his sex life, while the Psychosociologist examined his social milieu. Then they conferred for a long time.

Three days later he was waiting in the hallway downstairs again.

"—no doubt in *my* mind that it's a—"

"But we can't ignore the endocrine implications, doctor—"

"You're perfectly right there, of course. Bittenbender at the University might be able to answer the question. No better Pituitary Os-

moreceptorologist in the city—"

"—a Tubular Function man should look at those kidneys first. He's fifty-five, you know—"

"—has anyone studied his filtration fraction?"

"—might be a peripheral vascular spasticity factor—"

After a while James Wheatley rose from the bench and quietly slipped past the doctors and out the door, limping slightly as he went—

THE room was small and dusky, with heavy Turkish drapes obscuring the dark hallway beyond. A suggestion of incense hung in the air.

In due course a gaunt, swarthy man in mustache and turban appeared through the curtains and bowed solemnly. "You come with a problem?" he asked, in a slight accent.

"As a matter of fact," said James Wheatley hesitantly, "I've been having a pain in my toe—"

THE END

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L etters

from the R eaders

OFF THE EDGE OF HIS CHAIR!

Dear Bill Hamling:

The September issue of **IMAGINATIVE TALES** was tops. The new editorial policy pleasantly surprised me, and the cover nearly shoved me off the edge of my chair! The humor you had been running in the past was enjoyable, but was becoming monotonous. Not so the new action-packed stories!

On to the September issue itself: **TERROR STATION** by Dwight V. Swain. This novel will be a favorite of mine for a long time to come. I couldn't help thinking what a gripping motion picture it would make. In fact, I'm sure I'm not the only one who would like to see it on the screen.

COFFIN FOR TWO by Winston K. Marks—good; still, I had the impression I had read the story—I mean one like it—before.

THE INVISIBLE ENEMY by Jerry Sohl—excellent. It was clever the way the clues led up to the conclusion.

THE BRAT by Henry Slesar—

the only bad apple in the lot. The ending seemed especially weak.

BUCK AND THE SPACE WAR by Mack Reynolds—can't hate this one as I'm still laughing too hard to think!

Before I forget, could you or anyone tell me where I can get copies of **FANTASTIC ADVENTURES** containing **TOFFEE** stories?

Keep up the good work on **IMAGINATIVE TALES**—and of course, on **IMAGINATION** too!

Linwood Kemp
150 West St.

Wilmington, Mass.

Your letter is typical of most we've received on the September issue, Lin. And frankly, it makes us quite pleased. We remember when we first started reading science fiction we always went for action stories—and times haven't changed one bit for people today. The big trouble with science fiction during the past several years has been a tendency to pull away from the fundamentals of "good story telling" and substitute a lot of intellectual (so called) hogwash.

Well, we are sick of that type of story and we're doing something about it. You'll be equally pleased with future issues of both our science fiction magazines—**MADGE** and **TALES**—where you'll find interesting covers, stories, and departments . . . As to old issues of **FA** containing **TOFFEE** stories, we don't know where you'll find them unless you write some of the fan magazine editors listed in **FANDORA'S BOX** each issue in our companion magazine, **IMAGINATION**. Or perhaps some readers will write in to you now that you've made your desire known wlv

WE MAIL IN HEAVY ENVELOPES!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I have a problem in obtaining new issues of **IMAGINATIVE TALES**. Having moved I am now able to find only scattered issues on the local stands. For that matter, I rarely find **IMAGINATION**, **GALAXY**, and **IF**.

Point is, I don't subscribe because a magazine never arrives in good condition unless it is mailed in an envelope—Also, if a magazine folds you are out of luck.

What can I do?

Anthony Zampetti
253 Snyder St.
Orange, N. J.

You really have no problem where **IMAGINATIVE TALES** and **IMAGINATION** are concerned, Tony. Both magazines are always mailed to subscribers in **HEAVY** protecting envelopes. This costs us quite a bit extra in servicing subscriptions, but we feel the same way you do about re-

ceiving magazines in the mail without adequate protection to keep them in perfect condition. So don't worry about subscribing to **TALES** or **MADGE**. wlv

WORD FROM ENGLAND

Dear Mr. Hamling:

One of my dear friends in the USA was kind enough to send me the recent issue of your magazine. After I had expressed my delight of this most agreeable science fiction magazine, I made arrangements to have it sent to me regularly.

I have read many science fiction magazines but yours has pleased me the most; you seem to have a "knack" to blend the stories into a digestable package of entertaining reading for the layman.

So I hurry to send you very sincere good wishes as you outclass each and every publication in the science fiction field.

Finally, may I say how delighted I would be to hear from some of your readers, and perhaps even exchange copies of our British magazines in science fiction for American ones.

As for you personally, if you ever get to England, it would be a pleasure to meet you and show you around and make you feel at home. Just a little return for the enjoyment your magazine gives me.

Henry Hold
151 Clapham Park Road
London S. W. 4 England

Thank you for the nice letter, Hank, and we'll look forward to hearing from you again soon. And that goes for all you readers—drop us a line as we will be expanding the letter section next issue . . wlv

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INTRODUCING the Author

★ *Raymond A. Palmer* ★

(Concluded from Page 109)

cord, but when you consider that only five of those magazines are still published, it's not so hot."

And so it goes. My fans are legion (this legion was formed out of sheer desperation), and they expect great things out of me—someday. Till now, however, I have nothing to brag about except a very lovely wife and three fine children, a ten-room house with a staggering mortgage standing proudly on the shores of my own lake, and beside my own trout stream. I hate city life, and think city life will eventually destroy all individuality. I think free speech is our most important freedom, and that it is in very grave danger. I believe Americans are losing their minds—to propaganda via radio, television, newspapers, politicians, generals (drat 'em), and magazines (except my own). I think flying saucers are real, but I laugh at the little men the army is always capturing. I am absolutely positive they do not come from other planets. Because I believe in the literal sense of the 5th commandment, I've been called everything from fanatic to red. I be-

lieve an atom war is impossible, and will not happen. I decry and resent our government holding back the facts of radioactive poisoning, which they have no *right* to do, Russia or no Russia. I despise Admiral Strause, head of the Atomic Energy Commission for what I know to be false statements about radioactivity (whether deliberate or through lack of knowledge). I believe honesty is a dead virtue, especially in politics. I think the working man is a fool to expect the world "owes him a living" at *any* wage, guaranteed annual or what have you; in fact, he owes the world his labor, and to the best of his ability, and when he does a slipshod job, he ought to be fired. In short, I don't fit too well into a society that is becoming more and more enslaved to the machine, and to the madmen (meaning psychiatrists) who presume to lay down the boundaries of sanity.

And Bill Hamling will never fit this in the space he gave me, and it serves him right. I'm the world's champion yakker and I bet this proves it!

—*Raymond A. Palmer*



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